

December 21, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

"A New Leader"

Isaiah 9:6-7

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In our Advent sermons we've been thinking together about the "newness" that comes to our world and to our lives through our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Jesus, the Advent of Jesus brings new things into this world, or, sometimes, simply takes what is old and renews them within our lives.

- So a few weeks ago, for example, we thought about "the new call of God" that came to John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, in his old age, when he would least expect it; and the call of God that came to Mary, Jesus' mother, when she was young – also when she least expected it! Two examples of meaning and purpose coming to lives at any stage, simply because of the coming of Jesus Christ into this world.
- Then a couple of weeks ago we thought together about "the new vision" that God wants us to carry in our minds because of the coming of Jesus the Messiah. This is a vision that we see primarily in and throughout the book of the prophet Isaiah. So we thought together about his vision of the world *as it ought to be*, especially in Isaiah 11.

Especially at times when we are trapped by a vision of the world *as it is*, which is often bleak and dismal and filled with evil, Isaiah says "Listen up, keep in your mind's eye the world *as it ought to be*, the world that God will bring to pass when the time is fully right, and aim your life and throw your energy into that direction, under the leadership of a new leader who will come (about whom I want to speak in a moment or two). So Isaiah raises up the image, the vision for us, of the Messiah-King, the Messianic Leader, side by side with the image of his Messianic Kingdom.

- And then last week, we thought together about "the new promise" that God wants to bring to our lives through Jesus Christ. How stunning it is that God, Almighty God the creator of the universe, should commit himself to people like us, limit himself for people like us, saying I am committed to you by my promise: Why in the world would God do that, except in love? And that love is embodied in the baby in the manger: Jesus himself is God's seal of the promise he makes to you and me, a promise that he will never take away, the promise that he will never fail us and he will never forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-7).

So there are "new things" that come to us through the coming of Jesus Christ – new or renewed things, which I hope this Advent you have experienced within your lives.

Today, following this same Advent theme, I want to think of one of the "new things" portrayed in the messianic visions of Isaiah that we are privileged to receive with the coming of Jesus – I want us to think about the coming of "a new leader": Jesus as a new leader in our lives;

or Jesus as the old leader, the one we've followed but whom we are now called to follow in a new kind of way.

When I think about leadership, I find it remarkable to think that one person, one solitary leader, can have a powerful, powerful effect on the lives of another person, or even on the lives of many people. The life of just one single person can transform even a whole nation. The impact of leadership can be remarkably powerful.

This past year my wife and I were flipping through Netflix and we came across a video/documentary called *Nicky's Family*. I don't know if any of you have seen *Nicky's Family* –it's one the whole family can really watch. It's powerful. It's about a man by the name of Nicholas Winton who is not very well known at all (though in May this year the television program, *60 Minutes*, featured him: "Nicholas Winton – Saving the Children"). In 1939, Nicholas Winton was a 29 year old stock broker who went to Prague in Czechoslovakia and decided that he was going to help Jewish children escape from the coming onslaught. Their parents couldn't escape (and most would die in the coming years), but many wanted their children to escape, and he decided to help. In total, he managed to help 669 children escape from Prague, mainly to the United Kingdom, and some to Sweden. And then he forgot about it. He forgot about what he did for 50 years. He didn't even tell his wife, Grete! So, in the late 1980's, 50 years later, Grete was cleaning out the attic in their house and came across a scrapbook, and in the scrapbook she finds names of children and homes to which they are assigned, and asks her husband, 'what's this?!'

And so the story came out, and Grete decided to try to contact people whose names were on this list, and found that some those children, all now grown adults, were desperate to find the person who had saved their lives. One contact led to another, and so on, and the network began to grow, and the story became public when the BBC brought all of these people together in one place, for the first time in half a century. Many of the 669 children were still alive, but living all over the world. And now they too had children and grandchildren, and the estimate was that there were now 6000 people who belonged to what they called "Nicky's Family." 6000 people who almost certainly would not have been alive today had Nicholas Winton not taken the action he did . . . alive because of one person, one solitary person who said "I'm going to take the lead"; who said, "This is not just *their* responsibility it's *my* responsibility and I will follow through on this, and do what I can."

Lives changed, powerfully changed, because of one act of leadership.

Of course we know from history if you go "up the ladder" there are great individuals, great leaders who have left their mark on history. You go back to the ancient world – to Alexander the Great, or to Julius Caesar; you go back to great figures in our own American history – to George Washington or Abraham Lincoln and you say these people left a mark on society. You go back

to great people in social history – to people like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Junior, who left an impact on the way we live our lives together. You go back to Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, and you think of the impact of one person on our whole understanding of technology. It's powerful! You can certainly go “up the ladder” to find these great figures; but I like to go down the ladder as well when it comes to leadership – “down” to people who touch people's lives, other people's lives, and impact other lives one by one on a more personal level as well.

So when I think of leadership and the impact of a single person I also think of a man by the name of Rick Mixon whom you almost certainly have never heard of. He worked for a trucking company when I first met him. He may still be in that business for all I know. But the impact of his leadership on my life came in the season when he was my son's Little League baseball coach. My son's team the previous year had been okay. The coach had been a good coach. But when Rick Mixon came along everything changed. He knew baseball, he loved baseball. He knew little boys and he loved little boys. And we parents watched as he took a very average group of little boys (there was one super star in the mix!) and blended them into a team which kept on winning one game after another when they weren't supposed to. Our team got all the way to the finals of the playoff, and then we lost to the dreaded Rangers in the final. But while the loss was painful, it really didn't matter. We looked at the other team – and saw their coach pushing and shouting and screaming at those boys; we saw their parents stunned into silence and fear, and joylessness. While we were cheering and encouraging even when we blew it. Both on the field and in the stands it was because of Rick! Our parents and our boys had the most wonderful season because they were led – not pushed or bullied – by Rick Mixon! And it's his leadership that stands for me as a powerful example of how on the ground level one person can make a difference in other people's lives.

When Isaiah paints for us this picture of a leader in the 9th Chapter of his prophecy (as well as the 11th Chapter that we considered two weeks ago) it's surely a picture of a leader like this. Not just high and mighty (though he is!) but down here on Earth as well.

For a child has been born to us. A son has been given to us (our story begins at ground level, family level!) A child has been born to us; a son has been given to us. The government (the authority, the leadership) is on his shoulders. And, yes, he is mighty; he shall be called wonderful, counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, Prince of Peace. A great leader.

So this is the picture that Isaiah paints and knowing the impact of one life on another, Isaiah wants to say to us that this is the leader for whom we were born – our Nicholas Winton, our Rick Mixon – the one who can make all the difference in our lives, if we follow.

The trouble though with this image of a leader in Isaiah is just this: that *it can so easily come and go with Christmas*. We hear those words; “*a child has been born, a son has been given*” and we feel the Christmas spirit and that is wonderful. But the danger is that as Christmas comes and goes, the passage and its profound message will come and go too! So Isaiah cries out to each of us and says don't let it do that; don't let it disappear, but “Let the zeal of the Lord of Hosts,” that's his phrase, “Make it happen, make it real! Always!” . . . so awakening us, so quickening

us, so opening us up to the importance of leadership, and to the question as to “*who is the primary leader in our life? . . . The one of whom, when he speaks, we allow to be our leader? Not just our leader for a moment or two, but our leader forever and ever? The one who can impact our life and bring the best out of us forever?*”

May Isaiah’s words cause us to ask that question. *Who is our leader?*

Do we have any? I think we all do if we search. But sometimes we can’t name the leader.

Do we have many? In which case we are going in all kinds of scattered different directions and life will be very confusing.

Do we have a leader who is leading us down the wrong path?

Or *do we have a leader in our life who was born for us* – and who is wonderful, the best of all counselors, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace?

The impact of a leader is powerful. But who is your leader and mine? Not only today, not only at Christmas, but forever. May the “zeal of the Lord of Hosts” not let us rest, until we know that Christ is that leader in your life and mine!

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