

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [Advent I]
November 28, 2021
Rev. YoungMin Kim

With Hope
Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7

(1)

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. The season of Advent begins four Sundays before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. During the season of Advent, we look back and celebrate the birth of Jesus in a humble stable in Bethlehem, but we should remember the purpose of the first coming of Jesus on earth—to save us from our sin and reconcile us with God. In addition, we will also prepare for and anticipate the second coming of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all that was promised by His first coming.

Welcoming and celebrating the season of Advent, our church has our own practice of preparing for this season. Last Sunday after worship, church members stayed and decorated our church with greens. Please don't misunderstand the hanging of the greens; it is not to decorate our sanctuary to create a Christmas atmosphere. By hanging evergreen plants—either live or artificial—in our place of worship, they become “a symbol of life and growth overcoming and flourishing in the midst of the dead of winter, and so of the resurrection of Christ.” And they point to “the unending life of the age to come when Christ returns, the dead are raised, and the righteous enter life in the new creation.”¹ Watching and enjoying the evergreens in our church, on the street, and in your home, please remember their meaning.

During the season of Advent this year, we will be temporarily apart from our Lectionary schedule and have our own Advent schedule with four themes—first Sunday with *Hope* (Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7), second Sunday with *Preparation* (Isaiah 40:3-5), third Sunday with *Joy* (Matthew 2:10-11), fourth Sunday with *Love* (John 3:16-19), and Christmas Even with *Adoration* (Luke 2:1-40). Spending the season of Advent and Christmas, I pray that we would celebrate the joy of the birth of Jesus Christ as well as meditate on the first and the second comings of Jesus Christ.

(2)

On the first Sunday of Advent, we read the Book of Isaiah 9:1-2 & 6-7 with the theme of Hope. As you know, Isaiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah. He lived and served during the reigns of the four kings—Uzziah (reign: 781 BC to 740 BC), Jotham (reign: 740 BC-736 BC), Ahaz (reign: 736 BC-716 BC), and Hezekiah (716 BC to 687 BC). And Isaiah witnessed the collapse of his neighboring country—the northern kingdom of Israel (722 BC). He knew that northern Israel was destroyed because of its political, moral, religious, and military depravity. And an Assyrian threat was at hand to the southern kingdom of Judah. Facing the threats, the king and people of Judah relied on Egypt, rather than God, and believed that Egypt would come and protect them. As a prophet, Isaiah declared God's truth against the corruption of his day (Isaiah 1:4) and delivered visions of the future of Israel (25:8). The Book of Isaiah contains God's judgement against the southern kingdom of Judah and its neighboring countries including Assyria (chapters 1-39) and God's deliverance and restoration of Israel (40-66). With this understanding, let us examine today's passage.

(3)

Verse one says, “But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali...” (v. 1a). You know that when the Israelites in the wilderness moved to and settled in the land of the Promised Land, which was Canaan, the whole land was allocated to the 12 tribes of Israel, who were the descendants of the 12 sons of Jacob. Among the 12, the descendants of Zebulun and Naphtali settled in the lands of the northernmost as you see in the picture.

¹ “What is the Hanging of the Greens?” from <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-the-hanging-of-the-greens>.

And time passed. The kingdom of Israel was established, and King Saul, David, and Solomon ruled over the kingdom. However, when King Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel was divided—into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC. All the land of northern Israel became ruined; but worst of all, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were first occupied and destroyed, and most people in Zebulun and Naphtali were taken captive to Assyria. The Prophet Isaiah witnessed all the destruction of northern Israel—how the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali became devastated, and people in the lands were taken captive. And Isaiah left behind a record saying, “[God] brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali.” In Isaiah’s time, the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were the symbol of contempt, destruction, adversity, and despair.

But Isaiah presented a new vision. He said, “but in the latter time [God] will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations” (v. 1b). Zebulun and Naphtali were the land of contempt, but Isaiah presented a certain place that would be glorious. Where is it? It would be the land beyond the Jordan—Galilee. I will show two maps. One is the map of Israel in Isaiah’s time, and please remember the locations of Zebulun and Naphtali. The other is the map of Israel in Jesus’s time, and remember the location of Galilee. Did you find a common point? The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali and the land of Galilee are the same place. The lands of destruction, darkness, adversity, lamentation, and despair in Isaiah’s time will turn to the land of glory, light, restoration, joy, and hope in a certain time. Isaiah said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (v. 2).

This would be sure and realized because, he said:

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this” (vv. 6-7).

Even though Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He was baptized in Galilee—beyond the Jordan. As God’s Son, Jesus spent most of His time in Galilee for teaching, healing, feeding, and comforting Galileans until He entered into Jerusalem for the way of cross. The land of Galilee—once it was a land of the marginalized, but it became the land of hope for the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ.

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While we enjoyed the season of Thanksgiving, bad news regarding Covid-19 broke out. Since the pandemic broke out, four major variants have appeared: the Alpha Variant (formerly called the UK Variant), the Beta Variant (formerly called the South Africa Variant), the Gamma Variant (formerly the Brazil Variant), and the Delta Variant (formerly the India Variant). When the new variants appeared, the numbers of confirmed cases and deaths have dramatically risen, and the world’s economy has been shaken. And unfortunately, a fifth variant was found a couple of days ago, named the Omicron Variant, which is much stronger than the previous ones. It has not been found yet in the States, but someone said it is a matter of time now. We are not so sure about whether it will bring about the fifth wave in the world, national economic slump, and/or domestic crisis. Due to sufficient vaccinations and constant development of the Covid-19 drug, we felt we almost overcame the pandemic. Our hope for the next year seems to become vague. Pessimistic views seem to overwhelm everyone.

Do you face any personal crisis or hardship? Perhaps you barely overcame them, but then another one came to you. The goal of the evil spirit is simple. It is to make us lose our hope and be discouraged, so that it makes us depart from God. Whenever bad news comes to us and crises and hardships challenge us, we need to stick to God and have hope in God. Let us remember that the place where we are right now could be the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, a place of contempt, destruction, adversity, and despair. But it also could be the land of Galilee, a place of glory, light, restoration, joy, and hope. With God, Zebulun and Naphtali can turn into Galilee, but without God, vice versa. With hope, let us expect the season of Advent and Christmas. With hope, let us expect better next year than this year. With hope...