

The Promised Messiah: Seven Daily Inspirations from the Old Testament

Day 1 – Genesis 3:8-15 ‘The Serpent Crusher’

When our kids were at primary school, we were fortunate that there was a playground directly opposite their school. Most days, within thirty seconds of the bell, they would career out (with my wife or myself trailing in their wake) and find their way within a couple of minutes to the swings or the slide, along with most of their friends. I do still remember the time, though, that our son got lost. It’s not a big park and the sightlines are good throughout, but those of you who’ve been parents will know how it is – you look away for a moment, and....

For several minutes we got increasingly frantic, circling round the park: ‘Where are you?’ We were just starting to feel sick with anxiety when our son’s head popped out of the hedge. He and friend had found a small gap and crawled through, playing some sort of ‘hide and seek’ game. He was never more than twenty yards away the whole time – and we could breathe again!

‘Where are you?’ Possibly the most heart-rending cry in all Scripture (v9). The Lord is walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and longs to spend time with his best friends. But they are hiding – only this time not in joyful play, but in shame. They have disobeyed God and now the brutal reality has dawned: the serpent has lied to them, and paradise is lost. Indeed, you could argue that God’s cry in this passage is the divine cry to humanity throughout history – a loving Father calling to his hiding children, longing for them to return home.

The story of Advent does not start on page 1 of the New Testament, at Matthew chapter 1; or at the great prophecies of Micah 5, or even Isaiah 7. It starts here, in Genesis 3, on the third page of the bible. The first reading at a traditional service of Nine Lessons and Carols is this passage, and rightly so. It is here that humanity first begins to need a rescuer. It may be many thousands of years before the quest begins in earnest – but this is where it starts.

And in this chapter which, in many ways, is the most chilling of all Scripture, God also gives us a hint, a clue, a little jewel in the dust which enables us to dare to dream. Although judgement is pronounced, God tells the serpent that one day a human being would come – ‘seed of the woman’ – who would crush his head. In crushing the serpent’s head (once and for all) he would suffer – his heel would be bruised, to use the language of the text – but he would prevail.

The rest of Scripture could be titled ‘The Search for the Serpent Crusher.’ As we prepare for the start of Advent, we fix our attention again in earnest on this search, the greatest of all quests. When would the Serpent Crusher come? What would he do? How would he do it? Praise God, we know the answers to those questions – but may these glorious answers lift our hearts afresh with renewed joy, increased peace and flourishing hope. Thanks to the Serpent Crusher, the Lord no longer needs to call out to us: ‘Where are you?’ By his grace, we have been found by him.

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Day 2 – Genesis 49:8-12 ‘The Lion of Judah’

‘When Herod had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied.’

When we read this text from Matthew’s gospel (as we will later in our Advent series, and no doubt once or twice at other times in Advent), we immediately think of the famous passage in Micah chapter 5, the one we often use at carol services. And that would be right: not least because it’s the passage the chief priests and teachers of the law quote back to Herod in this conversation.

But, whilst Micah might be the moment when Bethlehem takes centre stage in the prophetic record, it’s not the first time Judea is given a significant role. Indeed, the central role of the clan of Judah – one of Joseph’s eleven brothers, from which the region of Judea takes its name – goes all the way back to Genesis, the very first book of the bible. On his deathbed, Patriarch Jacob speaks a prophetic word over all his twelve sons. Surprisingly, the pre-eminent place is not given to Reuben, the firstborn; or to Joseph, the most talented and his favourite; or to Benjamin, the baby of the family and most loved; it goes to Judah – fourth son of Leah, the wife he was forced to marry.

As so often in scripture, we can’t immediately see the obvious reason why Judah would be ‘the chosen line’. We look at the outward appearances – but the Lord looks at the heart. And, in the Lord’s wisdom, Judah is the line through which God’s great promises are fulfilled – via Boaz, David, Hezekiah, all the way down to another Joseph.

Judah is described as a lion – in the popular imagination, the greatest and fiercest creature of them all – and Jacob prophecies that one day, a descendant of Judah would carry the sceptre (i.e. royal authority) for the nations of the world, who would ultimately bow in obedience before him.

From that moment, God’s people were waiting for the Lion of Judah, who would fulfil this prophecy. And, whilst the images relating to the donkey and the blood of grapes were symbols of pre-eminence and prosperity in this particular passage, they also hint at darker meanings: the humble king riding on a donkey, the one whose blood was shed in victory, and whose blood we commemorate in wine – the one who made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant; yet who was exalted to the highest place and before whom one day every knee will bow, and every tongue confess is Lord (see Philippians 2:7-11)

The Lion of Judah is Jesus Christ. As we begin our Advent series in earnest tomorrow, may the roar of this divine lion ring through all of our reflections, as we wait in hope for the coming King, and in faith for the obedience of the nations to be his.

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Day 3 – Isaiah 9:2-7 ‘The Prince of Shalom’

I suspect many of us at present find it hard to watch the news – you may, indeed, have given up on it altogether. There seems to be so much violence, so much instability, so many reminders that peace in this world is fragile and hard to maintain, however sophisticated we consider ourselves to be.

How we need today’s passage! Isaiah has a great vision of the peace that God will ultimately bring to this fractured world. Admittedly the context is set more in terms of a victory for God’s people: nevertheless it is equally clear that, in this vision of a healed world, there will be no more need for armies or violence – blood-soaked boots and clothes will be burned and done away with forever (v5).

But this vision in chapter 9 goes a step further than his previous glorious vision of peace in chapter 2 – *there will be a focal point for this new era of peace*. A child will be born who carries divine authority, who will usher in and oversee this restoration of all things. And this child will have wonderful names, including perhaps the loveliest of all, certainly the most appropriate for this week: the Prince of Peace. Or, to use the original word, the Prince of Shalom.

Shalom is now translated peace, but its meaning is much broader than our traditional definition. It means completeness or wholeness, the sense of everything being put right, perfected. This kind of shalom is much more than merely the absence of conflict, *it is an active state of complete wellbeing*.

This is the destiny which God intends for his world. And he will achieve it through the son which he gives (v6). *Jesus is the Prince of Shalom*. No wonder the angels cry out at his birth: ‘on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests!’ (Luke 2:14)

May today’s passage give us renewed faith – even a little mustard seed of it – to pray for our world. Let’s also give thanks that, above and beyond our human leaders, there reigns a greater, divine leader, one whose vision for the world is ultimately to establish complete wellbeing for all people, and whose vision *will* one day come to pass: Jesus, the Prince of Shalom. And may that divine shalom be ours today – the shalom that transcends all understanding.

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Day 4 – Isaiah 7:14 ‘God with us’

God with us. That’s really the whole ball game, isn’t it? In Advent it’s customary to tell the ageless story afresh, and marvel again at the wonder of it all: the angels, the shepherds, the wise men, the journey to Bethlehem, a young carpenter and his pregnant wife, the stable and that glorious Christmas night.

But, in all the beauty and mystery of what is to come, nothing really summarises it better than this one word: Emmanuel. God *with* us.

It was always the plan. God is not a distant deity, who winds the clock up and observes passively while it runs. God is a ‘with’ kind of God at the very core of his being. It begins as *God with himself*: ‘the Word was with God’ (John 1:1) as the Spirit hovered over the waters (Genesis 1:2) – a Trinity of love.

Then *God with humanity*, as originally intended. Humans made in his image, knowing true intimacy with each other, and with their Creator. And the Lord comes walking into Eden in the cool of the day to spend time *with* Adam and Eve, only to find the barriers up, and the pattern dislocated.

After that time, we are no longer with God – but even so, not everyone gets the memo. King David, among others down the centuries, knew what it was like to experience God’s presence: ‘I will fear no evil, for you are *with* me.’ (Psalm 23:4)

Somehow the promise never goes away, never disappears for good. God would be with us – in a new way, for all time. It would take a miracle – the Virgin birth – but it would surely come to pass.

And seven centuries later, it does. God comes down to earth. God with us as never before. And this divine Son grows up to utter this great promise: ‘My Spirit will be *with* you.... Abide in me.’ God with us for all time.

There so much we can say about what the Christmas story means. But let’s start here – and maybe let’s finish here, too. *God is with us*. May this beautiful, intimate, faithful God be with you today, and throughout this season. And may this stir all of our hearts to joy and adoration. O come, o come Emmanuel.

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Day 5 – Isaiah 52:7-10 ‘Beautiful feet’

Recently I watched the Sound of Music for the first time in many years. I’ll always remember my first viewing of the film – after Charles and Di’s wedding in July 1981. We watched the ‘wedding of the century’ then all sat and watched The Sound of Music as a family. Perfect.

And it’s hard to beat the scene at the end of the film, watching the family walking across the mountain-top to freedom. How lovely on the mountains are the feet of those bringing good news. Especially if they can sing close harmony as well.

In the case of the Von Trapp family, the good news was primarily personal – but here in today’s passage, the good news is altogether more universal. It’s likely that the latter chapters of Isaiah were written in the late 6th century, after Jerusalem had been conquered and destroyed by the Babylonian army – hence the reference to ‘ruins of Jerusalem’ in v9. Good news was in short supply. Where was hope?

Hope was coming. The watchmen would see it and find joy (v8). The ruins themselves would sing (v9). And over the mountains would come feet bringing good news (v7).

600 years later, those feet would announce the good news that the kingdom of God was near. Those feet would travel up the hillside to deliver the Beatitudes, to hear Peter’s confession of the Christ and to meet Moses and Elijah. But a short while later, those same feet would also climb Mount Moriah, carrying a cross lashed across their owner’s back.

God’s good news is sure, and true. But it’s more than ‘the hills are alive’, lovely as that is. It came at a great cost. As we’ll see tomorrow, its beauty lay in sacrifice. Peace was won the hard way.

Nevertheless, it remains good news – more than that, it’s still the best news I ever heard! And although it came after great waiting and at great cost, nothing is more true than the final words of the passage: all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

We are part of God’s big salvation story. Give thanks for those beautiful feet that brought good news to you.

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Day 6 – Isaiah 53:4-6 ‘Healed by his wounds’

‘Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’

John the Baptist’s iconic words addressed to Jesus in the first chapter of John’s gospel are rooted in today’s famous passage. Ever since the time of Exodus, the image of the sacrificial lamb had come to symbolise God’s rescue of his people. Every year, at Passover, all Jewish families would re-enact God’s salvation by the Red Sea, and a dish of lamb would be at the heart of the meal.

But something new was coming. The servant songs of Isaiah, which are studied through the later chapters of the book, promise a new rescue and a new rescuer. This anointed one (Messiah) would carry great authority and integrity, would stand for justice, and would bring salvation, not just to Israel, but to the world. This servant would be ‘raised and lifted up and highly exalted’ (52:13), and earthly kings would ‘shut their mouths because of him’ (52:15).

There’s a sting in the tail, however. Because it’s not the whole story. This same servant would not just be the Lion of Judah – he would also be the Lamb, sacrificed for all. Indeed he would be ‘led like a lamb to the slaughter’ (v7). Why? Verses 4-6 make it clear. ‘He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.’ All our human selfishness, all our rebellion against God, placed upon his shoulders – *so that we might have peace.* (v5)

‘No peace without justice’ – so has sung many a liberation movement in recent decades. In today’s passage, we are addressing the ultimate yardstick of justice – our standing before Almighty God. And it is the Lamb who symbolises God’s perfect justice and mercy. God takes the punishment himself, that we might be healed, that we might have peace.

Every second Sunday in November, millions of us gather to remember and honour the sacrifice of so many in war, and give thanks for the peace that we now share. But today, let’s remember an even greater sacrifice which won an even deeper peace. And may the good news that, through Jesus’ sacrifice, we have peace with God cause us to give thanks; may it lift our hearts today and fill us with his abiding presence.

Look! The Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world... Lord, we are not worthy to come into your presence – and but only say the word, and we shall be healed. Amen.

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Day 7 – Micah 5:2-5a ‘A surprising Shepherd?’

The Advent story is full of surprises. In many ways we're so familiar with it, that often those surprises pass us by. We think of shepherds and angels and wise men and it all seems so... *normal*. Which is odd, when you think about it!

Today's passage from the prophet Micah likewise has its share of surprises. Any of us who've attended traditional carol services over the years will recognise it – the promise that the new king would come from Bethlehem.

That the town of King David should feature is, we might think, not unexpected. The great shepherd king would prove the ancestor to an even greater Shepherd who would 'stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord' (v3). This ruler would transcend even the boundaries of the nation: 'his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth' (v4).

But there are hidden surprises here. The first is that prophecies of the new king's birth refer both to God honouring Galilee in the north of the country (in Isaiah), and also Bethlehem in the south (here in Micah). Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries – one was of noble rank and lived at the court, one lived in relative poverty and obscurity away from the corridors of power. How would this conundrum be resolved?

God's solution is simple, but beautiful: Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth (in Galilee), but had to travel to Joseph's ancestral hometown (Bethlehem) to pay Caesar's poll tax. Galilee *and* Bethlehem – both prophecies fulfilled without contradiction.

The second surprise is that Bethlehem was chosen at all. It may have been linked to King David, but in other respects it was a small, insignificant place. Its name means 'house of bread', and its main business was to live up to its name – it provided the capital city of nearby Jerusalem with corn, and also lambs for sacrifice.

Centuries later, the new ruler prophesied by Micah – the one born in 'the house of bread' – would stand up and declare to the world: 'I am the bread of life.' This Great Shepherd would himself become the 'lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.' You never really get away from the place of your birth.

God knew what he was doing when Bethlehem was chosen. As we prepare for our annual pilgrimage to the stable situated in 'the house of bread', may we too be fed daily by the Bread of Life, and fall in adoration before the Lamb of God. Bethlehem is just the beginning...