

Grace to you and peace from God, our creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

After listening to the words from Isaiah, how many of you have that particular chorus from Handel's Messiah playing in your head? Because of that piece of music and its connection to Jesus, as Christians, it's hard for us to think about these words referring to anyone else or any other event.

But in their original context, they were spoken in a time of war. The people were dealing with the invasion of the Assyrians, and also political corruption. A lot of the same things we hear about in the other prophetic writings. It wasn't a stable time in their history; it's why the people were walking in darkness, and it's what God called Isaiah into.

All of this was happening in and around Judah, the southern kingdom, where Jerusalem is. The people needed a word of hope, something to pull them forward. And Isaiah spoke these words. And most likely, this was a prophecy about King Hezekiah, who was one of the better kings and who was just beginning his reign.

As he spoke, Isaiah acknowledged what the people were experiencing – what they were living with and living through. And he told them that that wasn't the end. He gave them a different view of the future.

A time of peace; a time when through the leadership of Hezekiah, their entire nation would experience light and renewal instead of a yoke across their shoulders. It was a vision of hope that pulled them toward the future God intended not only for them but for the world.

¹Knowing the original context of this vision doesn't take away its connection to Jesus for us, but it changes how we understand it. For us, this prophecy also describes Jesus. It just fits. We're approaching Christmas; if we aren't already, we'll soon hear choruses of Handel's Messiah on the radio and in our homes. We're anticipating the celebration and the festivities, and the Christmas carols and the candlelight.

And, at the same time, we know what reality is today. When we read the news, we read about the "boots of tramping warriors" and "garments rolled in blood." There are countless stories about war and violence and corruption and loss of life. People are weighed down by fear, and the yoke of their burden, and the rod of their oppressor.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/643-isaiah-a-child-is-born-november-16-2025>

We're more than 2000 years on the other side of Jesus' birth and resurrection, but we're still not experiencing the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision. We're living with dissonance between the promise in Isaiah and the celebration that Handel lifts up in the Messiah.

And the reality is that the vision and celebration that we hold together in the coming season aren't experienced by everyone. Besides war and corruption, people are experiencing homelessness, economic instability, life-changing medical diagnoses, chronic health issues, grief....

We're not yet in an age of endless peace.

Isaiah's vision is still a vision. It's still a promise of hope. It's like a ray of light that shines into a dark place and pulls us toward it. Reminding us that neither we nor our world are defined by the things that cause darkness. We are defined by the light shining into it.

We are defined by God's vision of what life should be. A future that directs our focus, our life, not because it's our present experience but because it's what God wants for us. It's the direction in which God is going. It pulls us beyond our immediate experience, and pulls us forward in a way that brings hope when the situation around us might say there's no reason for hope.

The grace in all this is that hope is something generated beyond ourselves. It isn't something we create, because it's too much for us to do on our own. It comes from God, and pulls us to a future that isn't yet fully revealed, but that we trust God wants for us. It pulls us into the future defined by God.

My nephew Toby is a rambunctious 12yo boy. Before he was born, he was diagnosed with a severe heart defect called Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome – HLHS for short. The human heart develops between days 28 and 30 of gestation. So, before my sister ever knew she was pregnant, the left side of Toby's heart stopped developing.

It was first caught on what everyone expected to be a routine ultrasound at a routine doctor's appointment. And I remember when we first got the news, how chaotic it felt, and we were all doing internet searches about HLHS – because that's what you do now. And, of course, the information is all over the place because it's "Dr. Google." But any way you look at it, it's a scary diagnosis.

I also remember the plan that was immediately put in place for the rest of my sister's pregnancy, and for Toby's care after he was born. But as I prepared for today, writing about hope, I wondered when my sister first felt hope in all of that. I'd never asked her before, so I called her.

And she said that it was actually within two hours of getting the official diagnosis. She and my brother-in-law went from the appointment at Seattle Children's to the church where her mom (my stepmom) worked to tell her. They were standing in the sanctuary and they prayed. It was then that she felt hope.

And it was affirmed for her on the following Sunday, when she took herself to church because that's where she felt she needed to be. And a few days after that, when she was at work, our aunt called her and left a voicemail saying, "Toby's gonna be okay."

There's no cure for HLHS. We don't know what the future holds for him, but Toby is okay.

When we talk about hope in difficult situations, it's often with the words, "Hold onto hope" or "You just gotta have hope." But Isaiah's prophecy reminds us that hope isn't something we as humans create; it's too much for us to do on our own. It comes from God and it pulls us into a future that we can't yet fully see, but that we trust is defined by God.

It acknowledges the reality of what's going on – the chaos and the fear we feel when something affects our own lives, or even just when we read the news. And when we're in the midst of whatever it is that's causing us to feel like things are at their darkest, that's when hope shines brightest.

Sometimes it's just a sliver of light that shows up as an answer to a prayer, or in someone who unexpectedly helps you in some way. Or in a group of people that commit to sharing their time with an organization that serves others – like what we do here. And sometimes it's a human interest story that calms your soul.

Whatever it looks like, whoever embodies it, hope comes from God. It reminds us that neither we nor our world are defined by the things that cause darkness. We are defined by God's light shining into it.

We are defined by God's vision of what life should be. A future that directs our focus, our life, not because of what's happening in our present experience, but because God is the one who defines it.

Thanks be to God! Amen.