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Faithful Leadership: Isaiah 9.6 and the Task of Christian Proclamation

John R. Jackson

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. (Isa 9.6)¹

One surprise about this great passage from Isaiah 9 is that no New Testament author directly cites or alludes to these words that, to many of our ears, sound more Jesus-like than any other passage in the Old Testament. For ten years, I listened to the faithful preaching of Paul Watson and observed the wisdom of his pastoral leadership. In this essay, I imagine how Paul, an Old Testament scholar and Christian minister, might preach Isaiah 9.6. I also imagine how a New Testament author, say Matthew, might have spoken of the fulfillment of these words in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Isaiah 9.6 and the Eighth Century BC

Isaiah 1–6

Isaiah 1–5 includes God’s indictment against Judah and Jerusalem in the eighth century BC—beginning around 740 BC—for their failure to live up to their covenant with God. God is the aggrieved parent of Israel who cries out, “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me” (1.2b). Offenses that are singled out include violence used to enforce injustice against the vulnerable (1.15, 21, 23; 3.14–15), including the seizure of their land (5.8); bribery (1.23; 5.23); failure to protect the vulnerable, like the oppressed, widows, and orphans (1.17, 23); idolatry (1.29–30; 2.8, 13, 18, 20); and syncretistic religious practices (2.6). All of this is summed up as a failure to practice justice and righteousness (1.21, 27; 5.7, 16).

In the Old Testament, “justice” includes “fairness” (cf. Lev 19.15, 35), but it is more than that. Clint McCann defines justice as “the systemic creation of conditions that make life possible for all, especially for the ones whose lives may be the most threatened and vulnerable.”² Justice is ensuring that all can provide for the needs of their families and every person can have the resources to be a full participant in Israel’s communal and religious life (cf. Amos 5.7, 15; 6.12; Isa 1.17, 21–23; 5.7–8). “Righteousness” is carrying out one’s responsibilities in a relationship, actions that reflect one’s faithfulness to a covenant partner, whether to God or to human beings. Ezekiel expresses the pairing of justice and righteousness well: “If a person is righteous and practices justice and righteousness,”³ that person will not worship idols, will not break God’s

1. Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

2. J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Single Most Important Text in the Entire Bible: Toward a Theology of the Psalms,” in *Soundings in the Theology of Psalms*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 69.

3. My translation.

covenant law, and will not only refrain from oppressing the weak but will be generous and help them (Ezek 18.5–9). The person who practices justice and righteousness fulfills her relational responsibilities toward God and toward others in the community, attending especially to those whose existence is most precarious.

Isaiah lays responsibility for the failures of justice and righteousness in Judah at the feet of Judah's leaders. The prophet calls them "rulers of Sodom" (1.10; cf. 3.9). Judah's princes are "companions of thieves" (1.23). The description of the failure of Judah in 2.7 is drawn from the "law of the king" in Deuteronomy 17.16–18: their leaders have accumulated wealth, horses, and chariots as objects of trust. The prophet condemns the opulence of the powerful (2.7; 3.18–24; 5.1–12) and their reliance on military power (2.7, 15). Repeatedly, the prophet singles out the arrogance of the powerful (2.11, 12, 17; 3.16; 5.15), who even dare God to act against them (5.19). So it follows that those who are singled out for judgment will be Judah's leaders (3.12, 14). When God acts to restore justice, Judah will be without leaders (3.1–5); they will look for anyone to lead them (3.6–7).

Then the prophet makes two significant moves. First, he announces that God is bringing upon Judah (and Israel) a fearsome nation that will inflict this social upheaval (5.26–30; a foe later identified as Assyria, 7.17–20; 8.4, 7; 10.5–7, 12). And second, the prophet recounts his initial vision of God, the vision that leads to his call to the prophetic ministry—a vision of God as king (6.1–5). In contrast with the leaders of Judah whose covenant failures are precipitating a national crisis, God shows himself to be Israel's true leader, the Holy One of Israel whose reign is exemplified by the justice and righteousness that Judah's leaders have trampled. God's actions of judgment will restore the equity in society that is summed up in the pairing of "justice" and "righteousness" (1.27; 5.16).

Isaiah 7–9: Four Children, Four Names

Isaiah then turns to narratives regarding one specific king of Judah, Ahaz, who exemplifies the failed leadership of Judah (Isaiah 7–8). Early in Ahaz's reign, he is threatened by Rezin and Pekah, the kings of Aram (Syria) and Israel (the northern kingdom), in their bid to replace Ahaz with a more compliant ruler who will join their anti-Assyrian alliance (2 Kgs 16.5; Isa 7.1, 5–6). Ahaz reacts with great fear (7.2). He has three options: he can give in to the threats and join Aram and Israel in their battle against Assyria; he can seek an alliance with the Assyrians (or Egypt), subjugating Judah to a foreign power in exchange for security; or he can trust that God will fight for Judah against any foe that comes. Isaiah, prophet to the royal court of Jerusalem, appears to encourage the king to trust that YHWH will protect Judah—and Ahaz—from these threats. Ahaz simply needs to trust God (7.4, 9) rather than give in to fear or put his trust in the king of Assyria.

Isaiah's message to Ahaz revolves around three children whose names communicate Isaiah's call to trust. First, Isaiah takes his son *Shear-jashub*, "A remnant shall return," to meet the king as he inspects Jerusalem's water supply (7.3). Every time Ahaz sees little Shear-jashub running around Jerusalem with Isaiah, he is being reminded that even though his enemies Aram and Israel may attack, only a remnant of their forces will return home. Shear-jashub is a sign that they will be defeated—and soon (7.4, 7–9).

Isaiah then offers a second child to Ahaz as a sign: a young woman is pregnant and will soon give birth to a son to be named *Immanu-el*, "God is with us." And before little Immanu-el is weaned⁴ (so within a couple of years), Aram and Israel will be defeated (7.14–16). Thus, the Immanu-el sign serves two purposes. Like the Shear-jashub sign, it communicates a message through the name—God is with us (so there is no need to fear)! And it establishes a time frame—your enemies will soon be overthrown.

Sometime later, a third child is introduced, a child of Isaiah and his wife, whom Isaiah is to name *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*, "Spoil-speeds, prey-hastens" (8.1, 3). Once again, the name communicates the prophetic message. And once again, there is an announcement of a time frame—Aram and Israel will be plundered by the Assyrian army before little Maher-shalal-hash-baz can say "mommy" and "daddy" (8.4). So, the prophetic

4. The reference to "refuse the evil and choose the good" (7.15) in the context of the birth of a child and the food he will eat refers not to moral discernment but to the child choosing the foods he likes.

signs implore Ahaz, trust God! Don't give in to fear by putting your faith and the fate of the nation in the hands of the king of Assyria. Yet be warned—even though Judah is the home of Immanu-el (God is with us), if Ahaz persists in his intentions, then Judah too will become the spoil of Assyria (8.5–8).

Still, beyond Ahaz's faithlessness and the devastation it will entail, God will be with Judah (8.10). For those who fear King YHWH rather than the kings of Aram, Israel, or Assyria, there is hope (8.12–18; 9.1–7). There is yet a fourth child, a fourth child whose name communicates the prophet's message—"For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named *Pele-yoets*, *El-gibbor*, *Abi-ad*, *Sar-shalom* (Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace; 9.6). It is important to see this child, with his elaborate name, in the context of the three children who precede. All communicate the message of the prophet to Ahaz and the people of Judah during the Syro-Ephraimitic conflict of 734–732 BC and its aftermath. It is to this fourth child that we will soon return.

Isaiah 9–12: Message Repeated

Isaiah 9.8–12.6 repeats many of the themes of the first nine chapters, directed this time toward Israel in the years that lead to the destruction of its capital Samaria and the end of the nation in 722 BC. Israel's leaders are once again front and center (9.14–16; 10.11). They are condemned for their arrogance (9.9–10); for leading the people, even the most vulnerable, astray (9.15–17); for political assassinations (9.19–21); and for manipulating the laws to dispossess the vulnerable and deprive them of justice (10.1–2). Assyria is once again identified as the agent of God's action to restore justice (10.5–19). Israel—and Judah—will face the might of the Assyrian army (10.22, 27–32) as their ancestors had experienced the power of Egypt centuries before (10.24). The result of their failure to trust in YHWH and to practice justice will be devastation. Only a remnant of them will return home (*shear-jashub*; cf. 7.3) when YHWH, the mighty God (*el-gibbor*; cf. 9.6), delivers them from their captivity (10.21).

The prophet then announces the coming of a future Davidic king (as at the conclusion of 7.1–9.7) who will emerge from the devastation and lead the people, both Israel and Judah, in practicing justice and righteousness (11.1–5). The result will be peace in the land (11.6–9), a new exodus during which the remnant of the people will return from exile (11.11–13, 15–16), and the nations seeking instruction from YHWH (11.10; cf. 2.2–4). In the end, all nations will hear of the salvation and the greatness of the Holy One of Israel (12.1–6).

The Child of Isaiah 9.6

The message of the fourth child is a promise of better leadership. Beyond the devastation that has, and will, come as a result of the failure of Judah's king and leaders, God is still at work in Israel. A new king will arise through whom God will work his justice and righteousness for Judah. Elements of the name of this child link him to Isaiah's previous indictment of Judah's rulers. This king will be a "Wonderful Counselor" (*Pele-yoets*), and so embody God's wonderful counsel (cf. 25.1; 28.29); Judah's counselors (*yoets*) are among the leaders who will face judgment and will need future restoration (1.26; 3.3). "Mighty God" (*El-gibbor*) recalls the warriors (*gibbor*) of Judah who will be removed (3.2); Judah's rulers are only "heroes" (*gibborim*) at mixing their drinks as they deprive the innocent of their rights (5.22–23). When Judah's leaders are removed, the people will search desperately for any father (*ab*) to lead them (a member of "the house of his father," 3.6; my translation), while the rule of this king will be that of an enduring, "Everlasting Father" (*Abi-ad*). And the "Prince of Peace" (*Sar-shalom*) stands in contrast to the "princes" (*sar*) of Judah, who are rebels and thieves (1.23; 3.3, 4, 14).⁵ This new king will embody the qualities of YHWH, the righteous king. His princship ("authority" in NRSV, 9.6, 7) will be characterized by God's "justice" and "righteousness" (9.7), in contrast to the failure of Judah's previous rulers to practice justice and righteousness.

5. *Shalom* (peace) is not just the absence of armed hostilities but "is also associated with public order founded on justice and righteousness. Peace is what happens when a righteous order prevails" (Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 250–51).

Given the larger context of the Syro-Ephraimitic conflict, the subsequent invasions of Israel and Judah by Assyria, and the failure of King Ahaz of Judah to act faithfully toward YHWH, the message of the prophet dealt originally with the promise of the accession of Ahaz's son Hezekiah to the throne of Judah.⁶ The career of Hezekiah, in contrast to that of his father, will be characterized (if imperfectly) by devotion to YHWH alone (2 Kgs 18.1–7; 2 Chron 29.1–11; 30.1–9; 31.20–21). The narratives of Isaiah 7–8 and 36–39 draw a clear contrast between father and son. Ahaz failed to trust in YHWH and, out of fear, cast his lot with the king of Assyria and so subjugated Judah to Assyria. Hezekiah, however, would (eventually) resist Assyria and trust in YHWH to protect Jerusalem when Sennacherib invaded Judah in 701 BC (37.1–7, 14–20, 33–38).

What about Jesus?

If Isaiah was originally looking forward to the reign of King Hezekiah, what can Christians do with this most “Jesus-y” of texts from Isaiah? And why would a gospel writer like Matthew, who has an interest in explaining who Jesus is with copious citations from the Old Testament, never refer to this passage? What would it look like for Matthew to speak of the “fulfillment” of Isaiah 9.6 in the life of Jesus?

One issue with which we as modern readers need to wrestle is what Matthew means when he says an event in the life of Jesus happened “to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet” (a formula that occurs in some form in Matt 1.22; 2.15, 17, 23; 4.14; 8.17; 12.17; 13.35; 21.4; 27.9; see 13.14; 26.54, 56). Popular interpretations understand Matthew to mean that at some time in the past, a prophet made a prediction of future events, which now have happened. It becomes for many interpreters, ancient and modern, an apologetic move to demonstrate the miraculous nature of the Bible—the Bible is true, because this extensive list of predictions came true! What are the odds of that? But a closer look at many of the specific fulfillment statements of Matthew raises a problem: some of the passages Matthew cites clearly refer to events that occurred in the past, usually in the time of the prophet himself. And at least one, Matthew's citation of Hosea 11.1 in Matthew 2.15, refers to an event that occurred at least 500 years before the prophet lived—the exodus of Israel from Egypt!

So if by “fulfilled” Matthew means that a predicted event has only now happened, he is not a very good reader of the Old Testament. But perhaps the real problem is that we have misunderstood Matthew's use of fulfillment language. Perhaps Matthew is a more subtle and sophisticated reader of the Old Testament than often credited. The Greek word Matthew employs in these fulfillment formulas is *plēroō*, which means “to fill, to fill up, to complete, to carry out.” There are at least four significant ways in which fulfillment language in Matthew describes the work of God in the life and ministry of Jesus.

First, Jesus insists that John, the prophet of God, baptize him “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3.15). Jesus comes to John, God's prophet who calls all Israel to repentance and baptism (Matt 3.2, 5–6, 11), to fulfill his covenant obligation as a child of Israel to keep the commands of God. Because of this, God declares his pleasure with his obedient son (Matt 3.17). Second, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt 5.17). Jesus does not only keep the law fully; he also “fills up” the meaning of the law. Jesus declares, “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you” (5.21–22, 27–28, 31–32, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44). The law says do not murder (5.21), but Jesus extends and expands the meaning of the law, “fills up” the meaning of the law, to say that the attitudes and actions that lead to murder—anger, cursing—are encompassed in the full meaning of the law.

The third and fourth ways that Matthew expresses “fulfillment” in the life of Jesus relate to words spoken or written in the past that find their fulfillment in Jesus. The third describes an event in the life of Jesus that fills up an ancient passage of Scripture with new meaning. Words that in the Old Testament refer to events in the life of Israel take on a new meaning when seen in the light of what God has done through Jesus. The fourth has a broader scope: Matthew wants to demonstrate how the life and ministry of Jesus bring to a

6. The birth language of Isaiah 9.6 probably does not refer to the actual birth of the king, as birth language does in 7.14 and 8.3, but to the accession of a new king to the throne of Judah. So Psalm 2.7, where “today I have begotten you” refers to the crowning of a new king, who becomes the “son” of God (“He said to me, ‘You are my son’”).

climax the work that God has been doing in Israel. Matthew's citation of Hosea 11.1 in Matthew 2.15 is a good example of both of these. When Hosea wrote, "Out of Egypt I called my son," he was speaking of Israel, whom God rescued in the exodus. The next thing that Hosea says (Hos 11.2) is that "the more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols." Hosea's point is to contrast God's goodness in delivering God's son Israel from Egypt with Israel's subsequent history of unfaithfulness. How is all this "fulfilled" in Jesus? By linking the story of Jesus to this reference to the exodus event, Matthew demonstrates that the same God of Abraham who was at work in the exodus of Abraham's descendants from Egyptian slavery is still at work in the life and ministry of Jesus. And the association with the exodus suggests that we should understand the culmination of God's work in Jesus as a new exodus, the work of God to deliver people who are enslaved. Jesus' work is not something different but is the culmination of the saving work God has been doing since the exodus—and indeed, before.

But Matthew's exegesis here is even more sophisticated. He wants to draw a contrast between God's son Israel and God's son Jesus, who was also taken to Egypt. God's son Israel proved over and over to be an unfaithful son. The children of God did not live up ultimately to their vocation to worship the Lord alone and to love their neighbors as themselves. Matthew declares that Jesus, on the other hand, is the faithful son of God that Israel never was (3.17; 4.3, 6; 11.27; 14.33; 16.16; 17.5; 24.36; 26.63; 27.40, 43, 54). In so doing, Matthew declares that Jesus fulfills—completes—the purpose God had for Israel. He is the faithful son Israel should have been but never fully was.⁷

How might Matthew say that Jesus "fulfills the words" of Isaiah 9.6–7? One problem for Matthew was that he generally used the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible—for his Old Testament quotations, and the Septuagint lacks the fourfold name in Isaiah 9.6.⁸ The Septuagint translates 9.6b: "and his name is called Messenger of Great Counsel, for I will bring peace upon the rulers, peace and health to him." Based on this version of Isaiah 9.6, Matthew could have followed his report of the amazement of the crowds who heard the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7.28–29) by writing, "This happened to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, 'his name will be called the Messenger of Great Counsel.'" Jesus fills up the words of Isaiah with new meaning: Jesus is the greatest teacher of the wise counsel of God. While Hezekiah was a good king, he never fully actualized the royal qualities described in the names of Isaiah 9.6. But the life and teaching of Jesus embody the justice and righteousness that were the responsibility of Israel's leaders, and of the king of Isaiah 9.6–7 especially. Jesus pronounces the blessedness of those who are dispirited (perhaps from being marginalized or oppressed, as the Common English Bible translates—"Happy are people who are hopeless," Matt 5.3) and those "who have been humbled" (Matt 5.5; my translation).⁹ In his final teaching about the kingdom in Matthew, Jesus pronounces blessings on those who embody care for the most vulnerable in the community—the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned (Matt 25.31–46). Jesus, in Matthew, is the Messiah whose kingdom is characterized by justice and righteousness.

Preaching Isaiah 9.6–7

Beyond the ways that Isaiah 9.6–7 might help us think about Jesus and his fulfillment of God's reign of justice and righteousness, these words speak to leaders in today's church. I can imagine Paul Watson, in preaching or teaching this passage, rehearsing the historical situation behind Isaiah 1–12 and showing the links between Isaiah 9.6–7 and the larger context, especially the connection between this child and the other three children named in Isaiah 7 and 8. He might show the larger problem of leadership that plagued Israel, and the regular reminders in the Old Testament that God is truly the king of Israel. He might then emphasize that leaders of God's people need to fulfill their commission to lead on behalf of God.

7. See the excellent article by Glenn Pemberton, "Matthew and the Prophets," *Leaven* 13 (2005): 89–93.

8. Fredrick C. Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 52–53.

9. This is an allusion to Psalm 37.11, which refers to the poor who have been dispossessed of their land by the "wicked," a scenario similar to Isaiah 5.8; 10.1–2.

For example, leaders in the church need to be people of genuine faith who do not act out of fear (as Ahaz did), who do not rely on power as exercised in the ways of our culture (see Mark 10.42–45) but who trust in the way of Christ, the way of service and self-sacrifice. Additionally, the church’s leaders need to be able to teach the ways of righteousness—to be “messengers of great counsel.” The Apostle Paul talked about the importance of teaching elders more than once (Eph 4.11; 1 Tim 3.2; 4.6–7; 5.17; Titus 1.9). The kingdom also needs leaders who embody God’s way of justice and righteousness. What does that look like? We need leaders who demonstrate a special concern for the most vulnerable, “the least of these.” They need to be people who help the church think about the “hopeless” and the humbled within our churches—those so easily overlooked—and the dispossessed in our larger communities. The church needs leaders who train us how to work for and speak in behalf of victims of discrimination and marginalization in the towns and cities in which we proclaim the gospel.

As in the eighth century BC, leaders of God’s people today can fail. No leaders fully live up to the ideals espoused in Isaiah 9.6–7. But in those moments when our leaders fall short of the goal of justice and righteousness, we are reminded once again that we do have a faithful shepherd whose compassion transcends that of even the best shepherds in the church. Like the qualities of the hoped-for king in the days of Isaiah of Jerusalem, the compassion of Jesus and the fatherhood of God offer a model to which our leaders in the church can aspire.

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