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Epiphany 3 • Isaiah 9:1–4 • January 26, 2014

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Textual considerations: The Old Testament lesson for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany begins with chapter 9 of Isaiah, which contains one of the best-known prophecies of the birth of Christ in Scripture, namely, verses 6 and 7. The first verse of this chapter is a transitional verse as is indicated by the fact that verse 1 of chapter 9 is the final verse of chapter 8 in the Masoretic Text, but is assigned to chapter 9 in the English translations. Verse 1, whether it ends chapter 8 or begins chapter 9, is a key verse in that it helps to set the historical context for the messianic prophecy that begins in verse 2.

Verse 1 looks back to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom, which included two of the northernmost tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali, in 722–721 B.C. In 701 B.C., the southern kingdom and Jerusalem itself were threatened by the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. Although spared at this time, Judah would eventually fall to the Babylonians almost a century and half later as Isaiah warns.

With the north subjugated, Jerusalem threatened, and eventual captivity certain, a cloud of darkness hung over Jerusalem and Judah because of their sins, especially their apostasy from Yahweh. In that context, Isaiah's words of hope, "There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress," were greatly needed and should have been welcome words of comfort.

The opening Janus-like verse of this text (v. 1) looks back to the conquest of two of the northern tribes that fell at the time of King Ahaz and forward to God's promise of salvation because it was precisely out of this region that the promised Messiah would emerge in the person of Christ, the very Son of God made flesh. It was in this very region of Palestine that Jesus Christ would spend his childhood and begin his ministry. In the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, Jesus performed not only his first miracle

(changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana), but other notable miracles as well, such as healing the centurion's servant, the paralytic man, and Peter's mother-in-law, and the raising of Jairus's daughter. It was also here that Jesus began teaching in the synagogue (Lk 4:16–21) and preaching his message of repentance (Mt 4:13–17), most notably his great Sermon on the Mount.

The clear message of this text is that God keeps his promise of redemption in spite of the apostasy of his people. He raised up the Messiah out of the very people who had sinned greatly against him. This contrast between the people's spiritual infidelity and God's gracious mercy is made clear in the various dualistic-type contrasts that run throughout these verses, namely, the people's past sins versus their future glory, darkness versus light, death versus life, gloom versus joy, defeat versus hope of victory. Christ began calling to repentance and offering the gift of eternal salvation to the very people who had experienced the burden of the law in the divine judgment of their sins.

The text contains some very clear law-gospel messages which are most appropriate for our day as well. A sermon based on this text may well draw comparisons between the sins of Israel, which brought about their captivity, and the almost mass turning away from God and God-enjoined morality that is characteristic of the spiritual apostasy of our contemporary world. The unrepented sins of Israel received their due; so the sins of our age will not go unpunished by God unless people confess their sins and cast themselves upon the mercy of God that is offered in Christ Jesus. In the midst of the current spiritual darkness, gloom, and apostasy from God, we need to hear God's call to repentance and his promise in the gospel as never before. What better season than that of Epiphany to speak about God's promise of salvation through the work of the Son of God whose advent we still celebrate in this long liturgical shadow of the Christmas season.

This text provides a good opportunity to point out that sins never go unpunished and that the righteous few will often suffer because of the sins of the majority. The great sins of our day may seem to go unpunished, but we have the example of Zebulun and Naphtali, who had already experienced divine judgment, and the lesson of Jerusalem and Judah, who only temporarily, not permanently, escaped the judgment of God upon their sins. This certainly is a fact of which our world needs to take note. Yet we and our world are never without hope. Verse 3's reference to the harvest is a reminder that God is still the giver of all good things even when people do not deserve such blessings. Verse 4's mention of Midian's defeat at the hands of Gideon calls to our attention the fact that God does remember and redeem his people no matter what their sins have been. What a joy it is to be reminded of the gift of our Savior at a time when the Christmas message begins to ebb from our everyday consciousness.

Quentin F. Wesselschmidt