



## Hope at a Change

Isaiah 3:18-4:6; Matthew 8:5-17; Ephesians 4:17-32

Advent is a season in the church calendar, in which we celebrate our anticipation of the arrival of Jesus Christ. We take time to pause in our celebrations and anticipate the coming of Christ at Christmas, but also his arrival in glory. Too often, we forget about Advent and run to celebrate Christmas without giving due importance to the meaning and reason for our celebration. Without reflecting well on the reason for the celebration, we simply remain at the level of festive celebration and rejoicing, abandoning a valid understanding of its meaning—what we have gained in the fact of God coming to earth and Jesus' returning in glory for everyone will accept him in faith.

We have great hopes and expectations. Sometimes we expect things that what would help us. Sometimes our hopes are misplaced, as appropriate solutions come from different forms and sources. The messianic expectations of the Hebrew people were like that. They had a defined concept regarding the purpose and means of God's rescuing them from their difficulties. The difficult thing for them was to wait for God's solution, understanding that God's will and way exceeded their specific expectations.

Isaiah's words were of comfort, but not the kind of comfort that people craved. We feel comfortable, after all, in recognizing around us what we expect to see. Isaiah's message came to contradict what people expected and longed to see happen. They wanted to hear another message. Comfort for them would have been a word of restoration of power to Israel. It would be a political resolution to their anxieties. That was not Isaiah's word, however. Isaiah preached a conflicting word, which in turn should have brought comfort in know that *Yahweh* was behind the circumstances enveloping the people. There was reason to rest in the recognition of the divine presence and action. The problem was that people were not at ease with that message.

The people had hopes for a resolution that would bring material and financial blessings. Their hopes were fixed on their physical circumstances, while *Yahweh's* major concerns were different. While their hopes were material, those of *Yahweh* were relational. God was also concerned for their physical needs being met. Along with that, however, *Yahweh* wanted to create a new dependence on God, and not on a political or military power. He called the nation to return to a recognition that it was not the king or wealth extended them comfort, protection, life, or material benefits. Their lives depended on God. Their hopes should likewise remain positioned in God and not on the political or economic conditions of their society and nation.

To achieve that, the nation would pass through an economic, political and military crisis. They were going to lose everything until God returned them to their land and their political, economic path. At that time they should have learned to live in dependence upon God. Their circumstances of life would no longer be the basis for their comfort and confidence. Their relationship with *Yahweh* would take the place of being their motif of peace, comfort, and real hope. Such a hope would pass from their expectations to accepting God's intentions and priorities.

That was not the people's usual path toward hope. It was part of the transformation God planned to work in the nation as a whole. Once again they would process the issue of God's palpable presence in their midst. Isaiah recalled the figures of the flaming fire by night and the cloud of protection by day. These were elements of the protective presence of *Yahweh* as the Hebrews wandered between Egypt and

the Promised Land. They were visible symbols of God's presence. They portrayed God in their midst in a palpable way. That was the real hope. That was the motif of conversion for their lives.

That future to come would not focus on political issues, so much as spiritual ones. The people of Israel in general did not perceive the difference in Isaiah's words. They could not see *Yahweh's* provision and presence apart from a political restoration. For them, there could not be one without the other. They hoped for God's blessing to be political, military, and material. In a way, they did not understand a distinction between spiritual and physical blessing. They did not yet have a developed concept with reference to eternity with which we work. They limited themselves to issues of this world in their theological reflection. In fact, we can learn something from this limitation, as long as we accept the distinction in Isaiah's message.

Yes, the gospel we preach has to do with our eternity with God. At the same time, its message revolves around our daily lives. Eternity with Christ does not begin after our death and the geographic questions of our eternity (whether heaven or hell, as we say). Eternity with Christ begins here today. It is in the now we begin to enjoy the hope that Isaiah foretold—God present among us, palpable just as in the cloud and fire of so many centuries ago. We do not err in speaking of eternity in heaven or hell, but we often lose sight that living in God's presence begins now. Yes, there is a reason for waiting for a more developed aspect of this reality on the other side of our physical death. Even so, it is in the moment we begin living the realization of that hope to the extent we allow our lives to be transformed today and now.

Isaiah spoke of God changing his people, making them holy. That was the initial reason for being a chosen people and their commission to meet God on Mount Sinai. They were to be a different people—distinct from other nations. Their behavior, character, and relationships would be holy, reflecting the identity and character of their Creator and God.

For this purpose Paul wrote the believers in Ephesus, that their lives should distinguish themselves from the manner of living around them. They should act in ways that diverged from the corruption of the peoples who did not seek to follow the parameters of Jesus Christ. They should look not to their comfort and selfish interests, but to living according to the character of God who in Christ gave himself as a sacrifice for others. While those around them committed themselves to their vices, the vice of the Christian would be love for one another. As people continued their indecencies, lies, and selfish purposes, God's people should live by the pattern of Jesus, who they accepted as their new Lord.

The real hope as predicted by Isaiah, preached by Paul, and exemplified by Jesus requires that kind of transformation. It is a sanctification that changes the way we act, revealing that God lives in and through us. The real hope comes with a change, taking our anxieties to replace them with a confidence in the presence of God. It changes our focus on the physical and material to the relational and eternal. It changes our disposition to seek blessings for ourselves into looking after the needs of others and to be conduits of God's provision.

Jesus Christ came to demonstrate that quality of transformation. The hope he gave people transformed them. Is it not time to let him change us radically? That transformation is what really matters and gives us real hope in exchange for our anxieties.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*