

The Seed of Hope

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We're taking a unique approach to Advent by looking at the *prequel* to the Christ story. In Isaiah 1-2 we took a panoramic view of what God has been doing in history, promising a mountain of joy to all who reorder their loves by putting God on top. When we do, God comes down the mountain in Christ and puts his glory on us, making us admissible to the mountain. Now we move in for three weeks of close-ups, where we'll see several features of the mountain—the Seed, the Branch, and the Light—each an image of Christ. Today, we're looking at *the Seed of hope*. Some hopes have been *dashed* this year. Hope for a child, a job, a spouse. Other hopes have been *deleted*. Political change, personal holiness, growing faith...and doubt fills the hole left by hope: Is this stuff really believable? Is Christianity really worth it? Yet, in all the dashed and deleted hope, we still pine for something, something to hope in. *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life*. Deep down we want the tree of life, a seed of hope. Let's see how to get there.

Temple

The seed first appears at the end of Isaiah six, but to understand it we need to begin from the top: “*In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”* (6:1). What's happening? It's likely that Isaiah is inside the Jewish temple, where only priests were allowed. In his vision there's a remarkable correspondence to the temple. The temple sat up on a mount, surrounded by outer courts where common people would gather, inner courts, and then the holy of holies, a perfectly square room lined with cedar, overlaid in gold. Inside, stood two angels fifteen feet high, with wings spread (1 Kgs 6). The walls shimmering. We don't have a lot of sacred spaces in American culture, but imagine how *you* would feel. Now, add to the surroundings of this stunning physical temple, the vision of a *cosmic* temple that eclipses the glory of the temple, where the Lord is so great that just the *hem* of his robe fills the loftiest place in Jewish culture. What does this signify? The angels' antiphonal refrain interprets: “*The Lord of hosts*” ruler of myriads of angels and men. God is in control; he's not standing up wringing his hands over your life; he's sitting on a throne of perfect providence. He's got the whole world in his hands. He's *God of the sky*. Holy, holy, holy. Now, this otherworldly vision is linked up with a very mundane sentence, “*In the year that King Uzziah died.*” King Uzziah was one of four Israelite kings that Isaiah served. Even if we don't know much about Uzziah, we know that he lived and died in a particular year (740 BC) in history. Why is that important? Well, this shows **the truth of God is situated in the details of life**. Christianity is not a mystical religion that requires you to escape, to go into a mindless state of meditation, or to retreat to the mountains. Biblical truth intersects ordinary life. God comes down the mountain. He's God of the sky, but also *God of the earth*. How? To simplify it, Israel is under threat of Assyrian invasion, and their tempted to form alliances with pagan nations instead of trust in God. But the kings of Israel disregard Isaiah's warning putting faith in a *people of influence*, forming alliances with pagan powers. Where do you turn when

enemies press down on you, when things get hard? When you hit a snag in your company, do you work through the difficulty with others or just look for an influential person or opportunity to pull you out? A friend, Tom, was really struggling with the pace and environment of his job. Tom considered quitting (quite a few times), but through prayerful reflection he chose to sit down with his boss and explain both his struggle *and* his commitment to see the company through the end of the year. His boss was floored. He'd never encountered such integrity. He didn't get fired (!) and now he's more peaceful at work than before, and things are just as crazy. When work, life gets hard, do you ask God what he's doing so you can follow him or do just look for influential people/opportunities to get out? He's a God of the sky—in control—and God of the earth—close enough to be in the details. Ask him what he's doing. You know how Isaiah responded? "Here I am Lord, send me." **Submission to Sovereignty.** Hope in God.

Tree

Hope isn't always easy. When you want that job, a child, or a spouse? Life can be hard. It's a mixed bag. Highs and lows. Joys and sorrows. To use a proverb, when hope is deferred your heart gets sick, and maybe not in an acute, heart attack, I'm leaving the faith way, but in a sneakier, more insidious way. Like arteriosclerosis, unfulfilled hopes slowly build up over time, a hardening of the arteries, until you cut yourself off from the bloodline of the faith. How do you know hopelessness has set in? The Bible becomes a relic not living and active. Prayer, lifeless not essential and vibrant. Community, a bother or inconvenience. Hope deferred makes the heart *sick*, and hopelessness turns to **despair**. Do you know what despair is? *Despair is abandonment of hope because the thing hoped for has not come.* And because life is hard, our hopes get battered. In these times, we need a sympathizing community who will pray with us, let us spill our guts without constant correction. But we need more. *We need to understand our despair if we're to get our hope back.* One writer describes despair as **premature anticipation of non-fulfillment** of what we hope for from God. Despair is premature because it doesn't let the story play out. You assume you know the ending. What would have happened if Tom prematurely anticipated no fulfillment in his challenges at work? He wouldn't have gotten closer to God, experienced his peace, or blessed his boss with his integrity. Do you see what Tom did? He redirected hope, from work to God, which is why peace filled up. Despair sets in, not just because it's *premature* but because it's **misdirected hope**. God knows the object of your hope will never bring you what you think. Some *women* want so desperately to have a great *career*, but then that fades and they want to be *wives*, but then they get bored and want to be *mothers*; mothers so desperately want to have *kids in school* (free time), and then finally the kids grow up move away and mom wants the kids back. A cycle of deferred and *misdirected* hope gets the heart sick, the arteries clog. Why? **Hope has one ultimate fulfillment.** The Hope of the world, who was there with Israel all along, but they refused to turn to him. The rest of chapter 6 describes Israel as a tree being whittled, burned, down to a stump. The scathing heat of Assyrian invasion, and the stabbing pain of deportation from family and country is all ordained by the God in the sky. Why? Because he doesn't care about their hopes? No, because he wants your hope fulfilled more than you do. Remember, he's God of the earth, in the details, and he's so serious about your hope he'll use pain (unfulfilled hope) to fulfill it. Lewis: ["We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God](#)

whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” God is rousing your hope, calling you to stand up and shake off despair. He’s rattling your arteries to get the blood pumping again, sending you into war, to take up arms and fight for against misdirected hope. This doesn’t mean you give up on lesser hopes, but you just don’t make them ultimate hope. You **submit to Sovereignty**, and follow him to find lasting hope. Your initial step may be sheer obedience, emotion doesn’t even register, but hope rises in battle. There’s a passage in *Return of the King* where the riders of Rohan ride into battle at Minas Terith bursting into song and slaying evil orcs, “*and they sang as they slew for the joy of battle was on them.*” Get off the couch and into the war. Hope is fulfilled in battle not on the sidelines. In the throws of combat, the heat of the fire, in the splintering of the flesh, and the slashing of satanic lies, we discover the seed of hope. Beneath our misdirected hopes and unmet longings lay a holy seed: “**The holy seed is its stump**” (13), and the providence of pain is for our joy.

Seed

How? What is the seed? It is the God of the sky come to earth. The hope of the world pushing up the dirt, sprouting a whole new world. The seed was promised at the dawn of the story, in Genesis 3, where after the world fell under a dark curse of misplaced hope, God said to Satan: “**I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.**” A seed, also translated offspring, is an heir promised to arise from the mother of life to overthrow the conjurer of evil. The Seed will crush the Enemy’s head, but be bruised in the process. If you trace this seed through the Bible, it reappears over and over again as the heir of David’s throne, who in the words of Isaiah will burn the bloody garments of war and usher in peace, “**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it**” (8:6-7). Hope is fulfilled in the Christ child. Mighty God and mere babe, come to establish peace on earth. But doubt says, that’s a nice story, but where’s the peace. Have you seen the headlines? **Peace begins as a seed in the heart of men, rescuing them from sinful, misdirected hopes to place them in harmony with the Lord of hosts.** The story is still unfolding; you can’t charge it with fallacy when it’s not finished. Faith is required if you want to join the redemptive ending of this drama. Is this story worth your faith? **Consider the Savior.** Jesus’ arrival is colored in with the detail of Isaiah’s vision (**Luke 2:8-13**): **glory** in the sky, a host of angels, kings bow down. The God of the sky. Royal, sovereign, in control, powerful becomes the God of the earth, in the **details**, glory come down, born in a cave but no gold overlay, he rules from a humble manger. Animals and straw for baby toys. No heated baby wipes or vibrating chairs. **The hands that made the world enter the world in Christ.** God of the sky become **peace** on the earth. His birth signals a turn in the story, but this is no fairy tale. He is not surrounded by guards, secure in a palace, dying a royal death in his old age. Instead, the seed dies a premature death, as Jesus predicts. This how the story turns: “*Truly, truly I say to you unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit.*” **For the bounty of a new humanity, the seed must die! For the fruit of hope fulfilled, he swallows up despair.** The Christ child is born to go through the greatest

pain to give us the greatest hope. When the seed is crushed at the cross, life springs up from the grave three days later, shimmering in glory, overlaid in gold, a preview of the mountain of joy. To join his peace, now and forever, in your heart and in your future, redirect your hope. The hope for a child, a spouse, a job submitted to the **Sovereign of the world**. And through this little seed Christ builds a whole new tree—the church, the people of God in Christ—to fill the world with his glory. You, City Life, are his tree, his new Israel, God’s new community united in Christ. Don’t settle for influences when you can have the hope of the world. Make no allegiance but Christ. Let the joy of battle be upon you. **Put despair to flight as you put faith in Christ. Heaven has come down, and peace with it, in the Seed of hope. Plant Christ firmly in your chest, and trust him with all other hopes. The mountain of Joy is coming. Open your heart to prepare him room.**