

And He will be called...

Prince of Peace

Only one building in Hiroshima, Japan, survived inside the two kilometre blast radius of the atomic bomb dropped there at 8:15 a.m., August 6, 1945. It is the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall. It still stands, not because it sat at some remote, protected periphery, but because it was the bomb's target. That made it the eye of the hurricane, the hypocentre of the blast. Fierce destruction radiated out in all directions for over a mile. It killed more than 100,000 people instantly. Many thousands more died from burns, shrapnel, fallout.

But the target itself remained virtually untouched.

Today, the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall is surrounded by the Peace Clock Tower, the Peace Bell, The Flame of Peace, the Children's Peace Monument, and the Hiroshima Peace Museum.

The epicentre of disaster has become the heart of peace.

That's a story familiar to us. The whole destructive weight of the world's sin fell on one man, Jesus. He was the detonation point. And though the comparison with the atomic bomb ends there, this much is the same: *The epicentre of disaster has become the heart of peace.*

Which is what Isaiah told us over 700 years before it became historical reality: *and he shall be called Prince of Peace.*

Isaiah is not describing, not primarily, some inward private experience of peace. Not that inner peace is beside the point: there can be no meaningful and lasting peace without, if there is no deep abiding peace within. But that's not the first or most obvious thing Isaiah is claiming. This is: that the Messiah's empire – his world empire, for that's the force of the Hebrew word for *government* – will be characterized by peace. Messiah ushers in and rules over a kingdom of peace. He rules over an empire of shalom, world-wide and everlasting.

This is a bold claim. But no more so than what the angelic choir announced at the birth of Jesus: Peace on earth, goodwill to all men. It's bold because it can be empirically tested.

Have we, since the advent of Jesus, experienced greater and greater peace on earth? Have we seen fewer military states and war-mongering tyrants and havoc-wreaking terrorists? Are there fewer wars and rumours of wars, or more?

The question answers itself. It's exponentially more.

So how do we make sense of Isaiah's claim?

He was, as we've seen, making this claim against the coming destruction and oppression at the hands of the Assyrians.

And he says why the Assyrians are coming:

Because this people has rejected
the gently flowing waters of Shiloah
and rejoices over Rezin
and the son of Remaliah,
therefore the Lord is about to bring against them
the mighty floodwaters of the Euphrates—
the king of Assyria with all his pomp.
It will overflow all its channels,
run over all its banks
and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it,
passing through it and reaching up to the neck.^{xviii}

The waters of Shiloah likely refer to the stream that flowed into Jerusalem from the headwaters of the Gihon spring, ending at the pool of Siloam. It's a picture of God's provision for His people: steady, quiet, constant, cleansing, life-giving, brought right to your doorstep. In Jesus' day, the pool of Siloam was known as a place of healing.^{xix}

But the people rejected that. They rejected God's solution to their problem. Instead, they rejoiced over Rezin and the son of Remaliah. This refers to a failed political alliance, about 10 years before the Assyrian captivity, between Israel's king Ahaz and some pagan kings in an attempt to ward off the Assyrian threat.

This cryptic, poetic allusion adds up to this: the people *have rejected God's gift and rejoiced over a false hope*. And now the very thing they've feared most will soon befall them. The problem they desperately tried to avoid with their political and military cunning is about to overwhelm them.

Why do we seek our own solutions when God offers His? When we do that, we usually find the very thing we're running from catches us anyhow.

But that all sounds like bad news, and Isaiah is the prophet of good news. Here it comes:

Do not call conspiracy
everything this people calls a conspiracy;
do not fear what they fear,
and do not dread it.
The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,
he is the one you are to fear,
he is the one you are to dread.^{xx}

Fundamentally, peace – or its lack – has to do with whom or what we fear.

Do not call conspiracy what these people call conspiracy. Do not fear what they fear. All conflict in our lives, whether with ourselves or with others, is rooted in fear. We fear losing something – our lives, our land, our power, our loved ones. We fear losing control, or losing face, or losing ground. And in fear we become defensive or evasive or belligerent. So ask this: *whom or what do I fear?*

***Fear God, you'll fear
no one else. Don't
fear God, you'll fear
everything else... the
way to peace is to
fear God alone.***

Fear God, you'll fear no one else. Don't fear God, you'll fear everything else. God is the greatest, holiest, most beautiful, most terrifying reality you will ever have to deal with, on Earth or in Heaven. There simply is no greater or more urgent reality than God.

It's why, fearing Him alone, holy men and women throughout the ages have been able to look tyrants, or tycoons, or typhoons in the eye, and not flinch. It's why David went up against Goliath and ran to the task while everyone else ran from it. It's why Peter and John and Paul, without bluster

or violence but with calmness and confidence, defied the most powerful men on earth, and suffered their wrath, and didn't break.

Whom shall I fear but God?

It is such a strange paradoxical truth: the way to peace is to fear God alone.

I sometimes wonder if Stephen, the Church's first martyr, was thinking of this passage in Isaiah – do not fear what they fear – when he faced his own brutal death at the hands of Jerusalem's leaders. He had just recited their own history to them, making them the villains of the whole plot, and lamented their rejection and persecution of all the prophets – Isaiah included. Those men ran at Stephen howling, full of rage, full of hate – and, deeper than all that, driving all that, full of fear – and bludgeoned Stephen to death with stones.

But Stephen? His face was like an angel's. His hope was unshaken. His lips declared praise. His heart poured forth grace.^{xxi}

Because his eyes were fixed on Jesus. Stephen had only one whom he feared. Nothing and no one else could shake him.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. He is the author and perfecter of your faith.

And he, the Prince of Peace, will keep you in perfect peace, until his kingdom of shalom is all and all.

NOTES:

^{xviii} Isaiah 8:6-8.

^{xix} John 9:7.

^{xx} Isaiah 8:12-13.

^{xxi} Acts 6:8-7:60.

