

# AN ADVENT REFLECTION ON ISAIAH

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Advent is a time when we long for a better world, and when we try to do something about it. We listen to John the Baptist and read Isaiah during Advent. And more than just listen, we go to the desert with John to be purified of our superficiality and worldliness, to be able to hear God speaking in our hearts and to be better able to experience his love, and live in it and share it with others. You have come here to the desert of this monastery, a place apart from the world, a place of silence, peace, and prayer. You have come here as part of your Advent preparation, to reflect on the beautiful writings of Isaiah, which the Church has always treasured and meditated on during this season.

During Advent we long for the peaceful kingdom where all the wild animals will be tame and dwell peacefully with one another. This will come about one day, and, more importantly, it will be a time of peace for us, a time of peace in our hearts, a time of freedom from our sins and from the guilt that darkens our soul, a time when heavenly peace descends from above and fills our earth as the waters cover the sea (Is 11:9). During Advent, therefore, we pray, with the words of Isaiah: “Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth be open, and let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together” (Is 45:8).

This is the righteousness of God that we seek, his holiness, which coming down upon us makes *us* holy. It is *divine justice* which will come upon us to make us just, to justify us. In it we will find our justification before God, for which we long. It is his salvation which will drop down like dew. Yes, we *have been* justified in Christ through faith, but with every new imperfection, with every new venial sin, we need a new dose of this divine justice, of this righteousness which the skies will pour down. Every time we disobey what we *know* to be God’s will for us, we *dim* his light in us and become sad and feel guilty and stained, and hence long for his forgiveness, for the skies to pour down righteousness upon us. During Advent we give ourselves over to these longings, and express them in song and prayer, and use the inspired words of Isaiah.

In the words of Isaiah we say: “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are as filthy rags; and we do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Is 64:6). Therefore we say with Isaiah: “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence” (Is 64:1).

This is our Advent longing. And what do we do about it? We go to confession, we pray, we discern our behavior, we treasure times of silence, we read Isaiah and other deeply spiritual books, and we try to radiate genuine love upon our neighbor. When God teaches us that we are not behaving as he wants us to, he allows us to experience desolation in our heart. This is *how* he *instructs* us and shows us a more perfect way to behave: whether in guarding silence better or being more loving to our neighbor, or whatever, and so we resolve to *change* our behavior, to repent, confess our fault, our imperfections, our sins, receive God's absolution and inner peace, and live more obediently, more virtuously in the future.

Yes, we long during Advent for the heavens to be rent asunder and our Savior to come down. We pray for this; we prepare and purify our hearts for this; and we await God's gracious salvation, a peace which the world cannot give. We await the final days, the in-break of the end times, the end of days, and the establishment of the peaceful kingdom on earth, among men and women, in our hearts, and even in the animal kingdom, when "the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Is 11:6-9).

Is this not what our hearts ache and long for? Is this not the deep, heavenly peace on earth that we were made for? Is this not the peace which the angels wished at Christ's birth in Bethlehem to all those with whom the Lord is pleased? "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2:13-14). Or "Peace among men of good will;" or "peace, good will toward men."

One day this wish will be fulfilled, for God has *already begun* this new creation, in which the peace of Eden will return. Those who live in Christ Jesus, *already live now ahead of time* in this peaceful kingdom, this new creation, and are made new in him with his peace reigning in their hearts, for "if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away; behold all things are become new" (2 Cor 5:17).

What we, then, long for now is a *fuller realization* in ourselves and in our world of this new creation, of this peaceful kingdom. How wonderful it is when we can communicate God's love to an enemy, to someone who does not speak to us, who does not like us, who has judged and condemned us, who has rejected us, who has written us off, who has completely misunderstood us and falsely judged us. Is this not the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and the calf and the young lion walking together? Was it not like this in paradise before Adam and Eve sinned? And did not Christ come to free us from sin, original sin, and our own sin? Did he not therefore come to restore paradise to us, a peaceful kingdom where all the wild animals are tame?

So during Advent, when we long for the Lord's coming, we long for the *further realization* of his salvation in us and in our world, and we make a great effort even now to bring about in our hearts, in our lives, and in our world this *peaceful kingdom*. Let us *seek* to live in it *already, ahead of time*, and thus help to bring it about in our world.

It is Christ the Lord, born on Christmas Day, who brings us this *peaceful kingdom*. Isaiah also prophesies this, saying: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6). Nowhere in the Bible are so many astonishing and wonder-filled names strung together in a single phrase to describe the Messiah, the son of David, Emmanuel. Here Isaiah even outdoes the evangelist St. Luke and the missionary St. Paul in his lavish and splendid description of the Messiah. Christ is *all* these things. He is *wonderful*, filled with wonder; he is a *counselor*, filled with true knowledge and wisdom. Christ is even our *everlasting Father* for he gives us new life. He is truly “The *mighty God*.” Here the Holy Spirit is speaking through Isaiah’s mouth something which he himself could barely understand—but he *says it*, and he *describes* the Messiah in this remarkable and most striking way. As “*mighty God*” on earth, he is “The Prince of Peace.” *He* is our peace (Mic 5:5). In him is the forgiveness of our sins, the removal of the dark cloud of sadness and guilt. It is he who saves us from our sins by his incarnation and death, and fills our hearts with *splendor* and *light*, and therefore he is the source and cause of our peace. He is “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6).

It is he who rules over this universal kingdom of peace on earth in which we have *already begun* to live. Concerning this peaceful kingdom, Isaiah says: “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this” (Is 9:7).

This peaceful kingdom of the *future* is most important for us *now* in the *present*, for we *already* live in it *in spirit*, and we are daily creating it all around and within us by our life of obedient faith. It is a *glory* that *already* begins to dwell in our land for those who *fear* God and live lives *obedient* to his will, as the psalmist says, “Surely his *salvation* is nigh them that *fear* him; that *glory* may *dwell* in our land” (Ps 85:9). To fear God then—meaning to reverence and *obey* him in *everything*—is the *way* to live *now* in this *glory*, the glory of the peaceful kingdom where wolf and lamb are friends, and where age-old enemies love one another, and express their love in signs of peace. This obedience makes the heavenly kingdom *descend* upon us, the kingdom where heavenly peace fills the earth as the waters cover the sea (Is 11, 9).

So this peaceful kingdom of the Wonderful Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, and The Prince of Peace is *already here* for those who have the *eyes* of *faith* to *see* it and the hearts *prepared* and *purified* to *experience* it. It is *already here*, but we still *long* for it, because it has not yet come in its *definitive form*. And so we dream during Advent of its *definitive form*, and in doing so we find ourselves living *now*, already, ahead of time, in its ever brighter light that is *reflected back* to us *from the future*.

This is why we long for the eschaton, for the Parousia, for the future *definitive coming* of the peaceful kingdom where all the wild animals will be tame, and where heavenly love and peace will reign over all. In longing for the eschaton, we *live in its reflected light in the present*. And we walk now in holiness and love, *motivated* by the *desire* to be ready for the *full* coming of this kingdom. Our hope motivates us to *live* in a *new way*, in a “*peaceful-kingdom way*.” And this is what St. Paul says, saying, “And the

Lord make you increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all, even as we do toward you: to the end that he may establish your hearts *blameless* in *holiness* before God, even our Father, at the *coming* of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13).

And so, in this light and perspective, we meditate during Advent on Isaiah’s beautiful prophecies of the future glory now coming to us from God: Isaiah prophesied: “For, behold, I create *new* heavens and a *new* earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox...” (Is 65:17-19,25). God himself will rejoice in the New Jerusalem, and it is his rejoicing in us which makes *us* joyful. We rejoice in him and he rejoices in us. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” says St. Paul (Phil 4:4).

We use *Isaiah’s* images of hope, as a basis for *our* hope for the future. He says: “In that day shall the branch of the Lord be beautiful and glorious, and the *fruit* of the earth shall be *excellent* and *comely* for them that are escaped of Israel. And it shall come to pass, that he that is *left* in Zion, and he that *remaineth* in Jerusalem, shall be called *holy*, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem: when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion” (Is 4:2-4). By this “branch of the Lord” is probably here meant the faithful and holy *remnant* of Israel, the *messianic people*, the people of this peaceful kingdom of the Prince of Peace. In those days the earth will produce *excellent* and *delicious fruit*. Our holy, new, prayerful, mortified, sacrificial, loving *life* in Christ will bring us to live *in spirit in* this kingdom.

And in that day “all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their hosts shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree” (Is 34:4). How similar was the vision which St. John saw in the Apocalypse: “And the stars of heaven,” he says, “fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken by a mighty wind. And the heavens departed as a scroll when it is rolled up” (Rev 6:13-14). And then the Son of Man will come in great power and glory on the clouds of heaven with all his saints; and in that day there will be a great light (see Mk 13:26). These are the days for which we live and long now, especially at the end of the liturgical year and during Advent. We long with Isaiah for the coming of the Lord, for his Parousia, for his glorious coming at the end of the world, for his rich coming in grace to visit and anoint us with heavenly light and a peace not of this world—“and on earth peace among men of good will”—as the angels wished us at Christ’s birth (Lk 2:14), and we also long for the annual glorious liturgical celebration and *actualization* of his incarnation and birth in the radiant cave of Bethlehem, with the manger, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the Magi, the ox and the ass.

Do we not long for his incarnation to renew us, to fill our humanity with the splendor of his divinity? Is this not the meaning of the joyous proclamation of the angelic herald to the shepherds when he said: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of *great joy*, which shall be to *all* people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a *Savior*, who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger” (Lk 2:10-12). This babe is “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace”

(Is 9:6). Divinity is in this babe in the manger, and it is thereby inserted into our humanity to divinize us with his splendor, to make our world splendid. Through contact with this incarnate “mighty God, everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace” we are filled with his *splendor* and made *new*, a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). And Christ said, “*remain in my love*” (Jn 15:9), and since his love is *splendid*, does this not mean, ‘*remain in my splendor, bask in my splendor?*’ As the incarnate God, he brings this splendor into our humanity, into our lives.

So we await three comings of the Lord: in history, in mystery, and in majesty. We wait in hope for the eschatological banquet, the messianic meal of the end of days, of the last times, of the end times, when, as Isaiah prophesies, “on this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will *destroy* on this mountain the *covering* that is cast over all peoples, the *veil* that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will *wipe away tears* from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth” (Is 25:6-8).

The final day will be a day of light and joy, in a well-lit banqueting hall filled with splendor. We begin to experience this joy even now, especially in the Eucharist, our messianic banquet in these final days with the Lord, who is our food and our sacrifice. He fills us with himself, with his forgiveness and light. We long, especially during Advent, to live more in this light, to nourish our spirits on it, to bask in it.

Our light does not come from the sun or from lamps, but it is an *internal* light which comes to us from the *Lord*. Thus did Isaiah prophesy: “The *sun* shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the *moon* give light to you; but the *Lord* will be to you *an everlasting light*, and your *God* your *glory*. Your sun shall no longer go down, nor shall your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your *everlasting light*” (Is 60:19-20). *God illumines us from within with his divinity. He brought his splendor to the earth in his incarnation; and our contact with this mystery illuminates us, divinizes us, fills us with splendor.* If only we could always be perfectly *obedient*, this sun would not set, even though we do not always experience it to the same degree.

In that final day, there will be much *joy* in the Lord, as Isaiah prophesies, saying: “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Is 35:10).

We look forward to this spiritual joy during Advent and we prepare for it by going to the desert with John the Baptist. There we live *simply* and in *silence* and *solitude*. We eat simply—“locusts and wild honey”; and dress simply—with camel’s hair, and with a girdle of skin about the loins (Mk 1:6). The desert life of John the Baptist is a life of *prayer* and *fasting*, in *preparation* for the coming of the Lord to the earth.

We see in John the Baptist *how we* are to prepare for the coming of Christ to the earth to ransom us from our sins, from this longing in lonely exile, awaiting the coming of the Son of God—The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace, who will fill our hearts with his peace and take away the darkness, guilt, and pain of our sins and imperfections. He will lower the mountains of pain, guilt, and depression; and fill in the valleys of deep emptiness in our hearts. So prophesied Isaiah: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be

made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together” (Is 40:3-5). God will level our problems that seem like mountains to us; and fill in our emptiness that seems like a deep valley to us.

What then must we do? *Prepare* in the *desert* the way of the Lord by *prayer* and *fasting*, *silence* and *solitude*, *giving up* the *pleasures* of this *world*, *actively purifying* our *five senses* and the *three faculties* of our *spirit*—our intellect, memory (including the imagination) and will—from worldly delights, to be able to *perceive* and *experience* the subtle, but *splendid*, *delights* of the spirit in *light*, *peace*, and *heavenly joy*. *Without* being *purified*, we will not experience much of the joys of the spirit; and without being *radically obedient* to the *will* of God in *all* things, even in the *smallest details*, *we will not experience much of this peace*, as Isaiah says, saying, “Oh, that you **had** heeded my commandment! Then your peace **would** have been like a **river** and your righteousness like the **waves** of the sea. Your *descendants* also *would* have been like the *sand*, and the offspring of your body like the *grains* of sand” (Is 48:18-19). See, then, the importance of *obedience* to the *detailed will* of God for us in *all* things. If only we had been *fully obedient*, imagine *where* we would be now! Our *peace* would have been like a *river*. That is God’s will for us. The fault lies with *us* for *not experiencing* this, in that we have *not* been as *obedient* as we could and should have been.

That is why we are now in the *desert*: to be *obedient*, to *purify* our *senses* and *spirit* of its *appetites* and *worldly pleasures*, so that our *prayer*, through this *fasting*, might be truly *filled* with *God*.

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## Appendix

For what do we prepare during Advent? For Emmanuel, “God-with-us”, as Isaiah prophesied: “The Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel” (Is 7:14). We await Emmanuel, God in our midst, within us, the joy of our heart, the redemption from our sins, the *divinization* of our human nature with the splendor of his divinity.

To see this wonder, the Magi, alerted by his star, came from the East to worship the new-born king of the Jews and present him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. “...and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, *went before them* till it came and *stood over* where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with *exceeding great joy*. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and *worshipped* him: and when they had opened their treasure, they presented unto him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Mt 2:9-11).

Isaiah prophesied this most beautiful scene in history, saying, “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come. They shall bring *gold* and *frankincense*” (Is 60:6). And the psalmist says: “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: The kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all *kings* shall *fall down* before him: all nations shall serve him... And he shall live, and to him shall be given of the *gold* of Sheba” (Ps 72:10-11,15).

Your light has come, O Israel, the light of the birth of the only Son of God into our darkness, to make us resplendent with his divinity. This is the light that illumines

Jerusalem. “Arise, shine,” prophesied Isaiah; “for *thy light has come*, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people: but the *Lord* shall arise upon thee, and his *glory* shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising” (Is 60:1-3).

We too fall down before him, to be transformed by him, made radiant by his light. God clothed himself in our humanity to illuminate it from within by his divinity. Hence we reflect on Isaiah during Advent, letting his word and hope illumine our path and show us the way to Bethlehem, that, with the Magi, we too might fall down and worship the new-born king, and be transformed by the splendor of his divinity.