

Christmas for Animal Lovers?

Isaiah 11:1-9

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening
December 9, 2007*

This sermon is part of the sermon series "Nine Lessons and Carols"

Please be seated. Now as Ligon reminded us this morning, this is "Isaiah day" ... (or "I-zaa-ah" day!) It's fascinating why in the Nine Lessons and Carols why they chose the particular texts that they chose. For example, many of us, I suppose, if we were doing this as a piece of homework, we probably would have inserted Isaiah 7, the prophecy that a virgin will conceive and give birth to a child. That's one of the most familiar of all the prophecies in the Old Testament with regard to the coming of the Savior.

In these two particular prophecies in Isaiah 9, as we saw this morning, the major metaphor, as we heard, was one of light shining into darkness. And this particular prophecy that is before us tonight in Isaiah 11, is a very different metaphor altogether of tree stumps out of which will come a shoot or a branch. Both of these prophecies have in common that the Savior, the promised One, will be a deliverer, a warrior-like figure, a king; one who come to rule and reign and exercise power and dominion, the like of which even Isaiah himself probably did not fully understand and fully appreciate.

I've been having a little bit of fun with the title this evening. As I read this passage over a week or so ago, a certain person in the congregation came to mind who loves animals, and I thought what a wonderful title for this particular passage of Scripture — "Christmas for Animal Lovers."

Let's look to God's word before we read it together. We're going to read verses 1-9 of Isaiah 11. Before we read the passage together, let's look to God in prayer. Let us pray.

Father, You have given to us an extraordinary gift. Where would we be without the Bible? I suppose it is possible that You could have saved us without giving to us the Bible that we have, but we would be altogether at sea; there would be so many things that we would not know, so many things that we could not possibly understand, so many things that we couldn't go back and check and re-learn all over again. We thank You that You have given to us a Bible that is without error

that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. We pray now again tonight that You would come down. Help us as we read the Bible together, that You would help us read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all...and all...for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's word:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Amen. May God add His blessing to that reading of His word.

I suppose as we read this opening chapter, for some of you this metaphor of tree stumps...I was thinking of when you drive up the Trace, and come to the northern section of it where the reservoir begins...and presumably some of you remember when there was no reservoir; there must have been trees there, because now there are just dead stumps sticking up out of the water. Some of you are thinking perhaps of Saruman ordering those Orcs to cut down the Forest of Fangorn, to keep alive the fires of Eisengard, a wasteland with just dead stumps. Well, that's the image.

The image this morning was the image of darkness giving way to light. The

image has changed, but the idea is exactly the same. It's death giving way to life. What is being foretold here in terms of these tree stumps, in terms of the darkness, has not yet occurred, at least not in its fullness. The prophecy is being given in the year 733. Eleven years later in 722, the Northern Kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria will be destroyed, overrun, overtaken by the Assyrians. In about a year from the time Isaiah is now speaking, in just less than a year, one of the great leaders of the Assyrian Empire...and the Assyrian Empire was one of the most fearsome empires the world has ever seen. It was way ahead of its time in terms of its military might, its knowledge of war and the machinery of war. It was a fearful empire. In about a year from the time Isaiah is speaking, Tiglath-pileser, one of the great leaders of the Assyrian Empire, would come and amass large portions of the northern territory of Israel. Shalmaneser V would overtake him; he would be the one who would begin the siege of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. That siege would last for three years. In the meantime, Shalmaneser V died, and Sargon II came to power. He took all the credit for the taking of Samaria. Twenty-eight thousand of the inhabitants were said to have been marched summarily off to the hills of Assyria.

In the South, Hezekiah, a good king, kept the Assyrians at bay for at least two decades by paying taxes, to be sure. Then Hezekiah began a revolt, and the forces of Assyria would march down into Judah; the immensely strategic city of Lachish would be taken; Jerusalem would be surrounded; 185,000 Assyrian troops were killed by the angel of the Lord as they encircled the city of Jerusalem. But all of that is in the future, that darkness, the tree stumps of what was left of the dynasty of David. You notice how chapter ten closes:

“He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,
and Lebanon ...”

That's where all the trees were, of course. You want to know where Fangorn Forest is, it isn't in Jerusalem, it's up in Lebanon...and Lebanon “will fall by the Majestic One.” It is God who is doing this. Yes, Assyria is the tool. Assyria is the weapon, but it is merely a weapon in the hands of God. God is coming in judgment upon His people. They have rebelled. They have forsaken God's covenant. He's coming in retribution. He's coming to do what He had threatened to do. He swings His axe and the whole forest is destroyed.

Judah would be safe for a couple of decades, but the Babylonians would come. They may escape the hand of the Assyrians, but the Babylonians would come and take them into captivity. But the Northern Kingdom... Isaiah is in the South; he's in Jerusalem and he's speaking now about this Northern Kingdom of Israel, but within eleven years it will be gone. It will be gone. No more branches swaying in the wind. No more birds singing from the treetops. No more deer grazing beneath the shelter and shade at twilight of these beautiful trees. That's the image. It's a picture. It's a very graphic picture.

And then suddenly from the stump, from this dead stump, there comes up a shoot, a green shoot. And it grows to a branch and bears fruit, and then suddenly the metaphor changes from a branch and a shoot to a boy and a man, and a king and a ruler, and something about this ruler that is going to affect not just little Israel or little Judah, or little Jerusalem, but the whole world: that “the knowledge of the Lord will cover the world as the waters cover the sea.” Something vast, something extraordinary, something that blows all of your categories now is coming out of this little picture. It's hope! As a light was shining in Isaiah 9, there's this shoot, branch, tree that brings hope.

Down in the South where Isaiah is ministering, King Ahaz isn't so much frightened of Assyria. In fact he is trying to make league with Assyria. He's trying to cobble some kind of agreement with Assyria because Israel was a threat to Judah, and Assyria was a threat to Judah. And Ahaz is trying to cobble together some kind of agreement with Assyria, and Isaiah is saying 'Don't do it! Don't do it! Trust in the Lord. Ask for a sign, any sign you want.' And Ahaz says, 'I don't need a sign.' And God gives him a sign anyway: the sign of the virgin who will conceive and give birth.

Now in this passage I want you to see three things here. First of all, I want you to see the ancestry and endowment of the king in verses 1 and 2; and, secondly, the rule of the king in verse 3 and 5; and the world of the king in verses 6 to 9.

I. The ancestry of the King.

In verses 1 and 2 — “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...” the seed of Jesse, the son of Jesse. There's only one person in the Bible who's called the son of Jesse, and that's David. No other king in Israel or Judah had ever been called the son of Jesse. When Isaiah said that something is going to come from the stem of Jesse, they listened. You notice in verse 10 of chapter 11... We didn't read that section, but it picks up again: “In that day the root of Jesse....”

The stem of Jesse...the root of Jesse. Now think about that. One is going to come from Jesse, but Jesse comes from him. He comes from Jesse, but Jesse comes from him. It's puzzling, isn't it? It's not puzzling to us, you understand, because David is the seed of the woman, the seed spoken of in Genesis 3:15. The promise that God had made that the seed of the woman would crush the head of Satan, this offspring of David, this one from the lineage of David precedes David because He made the world and fashioned the world, and was in existence before the world ever was. You must think of how Isaiah and those who heard Isaiah speak must have puzzled over what in the world Isaiah was saying. How can somebody spring from David's father and yet precede David's father?

And God has been true to His covenant, and God has been faithful in a day of darkness, in a day when all you can see are tree stumps, and all you can see is death and decay. And they must have begun to wonder what has happened to the promise of God. Can God be trusted? Has God abandoned His word? Has God forgotten to be faithful? And in the darkest moment—and these were dark moments—Isaiah is saying God's word can be trusted. This seed of David will come, this seed of Jesse, and He will be endowed with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him. He'll have wisdom and understanding and counsel and might, and knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and all of these are by the Spirit. He'll be conceived by the Spirit. He will grow in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and with men by the Spirit. He will be baptized by the Spirit. He will give up His life by the Spirit, Hebrews 9 says.

Here, of course, in ways that Isaiah could never have begun to understand, are all three persons of the Trinity behind the salvific purposes of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The endowment of the King, this extraordinary king-like figure endowed with such skill and wisdom and insight and abilities beyond anything that they had ever seen before.

II. The rule of the King.

And the rule of this King, in verses 3-5. He won't judge by simply what He sees, and He won't judge by simply that which He hears. He won't be like a king that they had seen in Jerusalem. He won't be like a king that they had seen up in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and in Samaria, to be sure. He'll rule with equity. He'll rule with absolute integrity and fairness. He'll seek the good of the poor. Like David, He'll be a man after God's own heart.

And how does Isaiah explain to us the nature of this kingdom that this king will inaugurate and rule over, and reign over?

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together,
and a little child will lead them.”

III. The world of the King.

It's Narnia! (This is where he got it from, of course.) It's a picture of — what? Animal Planet? No! It's a picture of Eden. It's a picture of paradise. It's a picture of how God made this world and everything that's in it. He made man, to be sure, after His image; but He made the trees and He made the wolves. And He made the bears, and He made the calves and the lions and leopards. It's a picture of

the restoration of Eden. It's a picture of paradise regained. It's a picture of a world without the curse, the world without the fall, the world without sin, the world without pain, without disease, without death.

Do you remember in the account of our Lord — and Ligon referred to it this morning — when our Lord was tempted of Satan in the wilderness? The major accounts of the temptation narratives are found in Matthew and Luke, but there's a passing reference — it's just a one liner. It's so typical of Mark to have abbreviated to one line, but Mark says something fascinating. If you haven't been there recently in Mark's Gospel, in 1:13 Mark says that immediately after the temptation “He was with the wild animals,” Mark says, “and the angels ministered to Him.” Now why did Mark say He was with the wild animals? Well, perhaps simply because He was out in the wilderness. But perhaps, too, Mark is saying having won this immensely important battle against Satan that there was just a little glimpse of what He had actually come to do: not just to save us from our sins, but to restore us into an existence and an environment where there is no more sin. It's a little glimpse, a foreshadowing of Eden...of the new heavens and the new earth. “He was with the wild animals.” It's an extraordinary statement that Mark makes. It's a picture of course here in Isaiah 11...a picture of carnivores that had become herbivores; of a leopard lying down next to a goat, and a lion lying down next to a calf. You know what's going through the mind of a leopard and a lion when they're lying down next to goats and calves! They're thinking “Dinner!” Have you ever watched those Animal Planet, those special things on the Serengeti? And you see these huge cats with all of their muscles, the beauty of their bodily movements as they're going along. I don't know how fast they go, but the camera slows it down and you know lunch is coming! You can see this poor creature, and it's all over. Absolutely extraordinary pictures, but that's the world of course that we live in. You understand that.

What is Isaiah talking about, really? All right, it's a picture. We remember Chesterton's famous words: “Stand up and believe all the pedants, creeds, and strictures; but don't believe anything that can't be told in colored pictures.” And this is a colored picture, to be sure.

I spoke to my best friend in all the world today. I speak to him every Sunday afternoon. He's in London. He's finished. He's preached his two sermons and he's relaxing. I'm still biting my fingernails because it's Sunday afternoon and I've got a sermon to prepare. I asked him, “What does this passage mean?” “Realized eschatology,” he said to me. (He went to Westminster Seminary and I was expecting that answer.) It's a picture of spiritual truth, of the peace that we know in union with Jesus Christ, that we've come now into a relationship with Christ where the warfare has ceased and we're at peace with Christ.

It's very interesting that verse 10 is actually cited by Paul in Romans 15, and he is citing it to prove that the gospel has come not just for the Jew, but also for the Gentiles — for the nations of the world. So what you have here is a picture of the

gospel, the redeeming work of this king-like Redeemer affecting the whole world — every tribe, every tongue, every nation, every people; and no longer in hostility against each other and at war with each other, but in peace and harmony and fellowship, as Christians from different tribes and different nations and different languages and different skin color are one in Jesus Christ. That's what this picture means.

Well, perhaps. There are those who see this as depicting something that happens here on earth after Christ has returned. He will return, take up His throne in Jerusalem, and for a thousand years (whether that's literally a thousand or whether that's metaphorically a thousand) there will be some kind of peace and blessing. I don't think so. That seems to me to contradict a whole lot of other things in Scripture about end times, so I'm ditching that one. Then there are some — and there may be some here... I think there may well be some here who look to a future near the end, before Christ comes but right up close to when Jesus is about to come, a time of extraordinary blessing, a time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a time of — well, let me use the word! — a *postmillennial* era.

Look at that ninth verse: “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” That there's going to come a time when the gospel will so spread to nations of the world that it will be as though the entire world — not necessarily every individual — but it will be as though the gospel has spread throughout the whole world. Perhaps. But I rather think that what Isaiah is speaking of here is what he's speaking of in the very final chapter of Isaiah, in chapter 66. And he's talking about an expression that actually comes into vogue in the New Testament: *the new heavens and the new earth*.

What is God's ultimate plan? Yes, to save us; yes, to redeem us; yes, to bring us home to be with himself; yes, that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. But we're looking forward to a day of resurrection. We're looking forward to a day of transformation. We're looking forward to a day when there will be a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell.

And what will be in that new earth? Wolves. And leopards. And bears. And calves. And perhaps Isaiah is painting a picture, the details of which we're not sure about. C.S. Lewis believed in a couple of places that the new heavens and the new earth will certainly be populated by animals...tamed animals, he said. Perhaps.

I can't imagine but that God having made these extraordinary creatures in all their magnificence and beauty — and you can be transfixed watching the beauty of some of these creatures that God has made, and if you're not, there's something wrong with you — that the new heavens and the new earth will bring out extraordinary exquisiteness about the creative abilities of God. Surely we shall not wish to measure the saving work of God by what has already been accomplished in these un-right days in which our lot is cast. The sands of time

have not yet run out. Are not the saints to inherit the earth? Does not the gospel promise to the meek the earth? The restored earth? The renewed earth? Is not the knowledge of the glory of God to cover the earth as the waters cover the sea?

Imagine little old Isaiah in Jerusalem in the eighth century B.C. seeing an extraordinary vision that even blows the categories of Narnia away, as though he has gone inside the cupboard and out into a world beyond where there are all these animals, and everyone knows the Lord in this world. And there are so many of them — millions upon millions upon millions of them. And the vastness of it, and all of it the accomplishment of this king, of this shoot that emerges from the stump of Jesse. In a day when it must have looked to the Israelites as though everything was entirely gone and forsaken, and God had forgotten His promises, and it is as though Isaiah is saying to them, 'You haven't seen anything yet. You haven't seen anything yet....'

And whatever your eschatology may be — and some of you nodded in different places, so you're not all on the same page! — but whatever your eschatology is, there is ahead of us an extraordinary work of God, whether in this world or in the world which is to come. That should give us such great hope. And that's what Christmas is about! That's what the story of the little baby in the manger in Bethlehem who was bigger than the whole world because He had come to restore that broken world in which you and I live, and to make it a reality that the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You. We do not know where to begin as we think of the extraordinary thing that You have promised in Your word. We look forward to our death-day when we shall be with Jesus, but we look forward, yes, with even greater anticipation to our resurrection day, to that glimpse, that first glimpse on that morning of the new heavens.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).