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December 7, 2025

Healing and Wholeness for Christmas
Isaiah 11:1-10

*A **shoot** will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

² *The **Spirit of the Lord** will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—*

³ *and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.*

*He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;*

⁴ ***but with righteousness** he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.*

*He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.*

⁵ ***Righteousness** will be his belt
and **faithfulness** the sash around his waist.*

⁶ *The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling^[a] together;
and a little child will lead them.*

⁷ *The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.*

⁸ *The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.*

⁹ ***They will neither harm nor destroy**
on all my holy mountain,*

*for the **earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord**
as the waters cover the sea.*

¹⁰ *In that day the **Root of Jesse will stand as a banner** for the peoples; the nations
will rally to him, and his resting place will be **glorious**.*

Well, we have 11 days left until Christmas,
So what's on **your TO-DO list**?
Gifts? Food? Gatherings? Decorating?

How are you *feeling* about it all?
 Are you stressed out?
 Or excited?
 Are you exhausted already?

Now, I want you to make ANOTHER LIST in your heart—
 of your *deepest hopes and dreams* for Christmas!
 Seriously---what would you put on THAT list?

Reconciliation with family members?
Peace in your own home, or heart?
 A *reunion* of family or friends?
 What about the chance to *go home*, or welcome others into your home?
 What about a sense of *calm*?
 Or *hope, love, or joy*?

What are your HOPES---
 for your own *heart*?
 Your own *family*?
 And what about your hopes for our *nation*, or our *world*?

I wonder, what do YOU PRAY for these days?

Maybe you pray for *food*, for the hungry?
 Or safety for *immigrants*?
 What about wisdom and mercy for *elected officials*?
 And we can't forget *Peace*?
 And hope?
 And maybe you're praying for *justice, in a world of hurt*?

I wonder---*What things on your to-do list could help you REALIZE*
 some of those *deeper* hopes and dreams?
 What things that you are doing to prepare for Christmas---
 could God use to help you move toward deeper dreams?

For instance...what are *WE doing* about food insecurity?
 Or solidarity with immigrants?
 What are YOU doing to bring others hope? Love? Peace?

We all have a *sphere of INFLUENCE*, right?
 We have people who watch us, listen to us, who are affected by our actions.
 And we can all make a difference in our corner of the world!
 By what we buy, how we spend our time—
 even just how we *interact* with complete strangers!

Christmas is a time to *make a DIFFERENCE*.
 It's also a time to seek *eternal treasures*,
 When earthly treasures are vying for ALL of our attention!

Several years ago there was a movement of Pastors and churches,
 called the *Advent Conspiracy*.
 It's a movement to fully celebrate the birth of Jesus,
 And much of it is about having and doing *LESS at Christmas--*
 like spending less on gifts, decorating, food and parties.

But a lot of it is about doing *MORE*.
 Like giving more attention to worship,
 Giving more—of your heart, time, talent, and love,
 And Loving more—those around you, and strangers too,
 especially the least of these.
 I wonder—*how can YOU do Less, and More this Christmas?*

The movement is about finding things that truly *LAST*—
 things that *Isaiah* tells us the Savior will bring—
 like *love, justice, peace, and hope*.
 Aren't these the things we really long for at Christmas?

The good news is,
 these things have been *promised* throughout the scriptures,
 We saw some of it when Jesus *came* to live among us--
 We see some of it *today* through His followers,
 but the rest is yet to come, when Jesus *returns*.

We live in an *in-between time*—a LIMINAL space....
 between Jesus' coming as a baby born in Bethlehem,
 and his *second coming*, to redeem all humanity and all creation.

[Just like the picture of the peaceable kingdom, we are waiting
For the day when all creation and humanity
will be living in peace, and hope and love.]

ADVENT is about that waiting and the in-between time.

For Jesus' birth ***AND*** his return.

Advent is about waiting with ***longing, and expectation---***
for the gifts of Jesus,
and the hope of eternal life.

All throughout Advent we hear from the prophet ***ISAIAH***,
Because he writes about the hope of a Messiah, a Savior,
Who will bring peace, justice, and love to the world.
Not just to the Jews, but to ***ALL nations, and all people.***

And you know what's interesting?

Isaiah wrote these prophecies and promises from God--
during times of ***great persecution and suffering*** for God's people.

The Book of Isaiah is composed of three different parts—
likely the first was written by the prophet Isaiah,
and the next two sections were written at later times,
in the spirit of the prophet Isaiah, using his name, and
continuing God's promises and visions of a new future,
with a Savior coming into the world.

First Isaiah, the one who wrote the first 39 chapters,
Was probably written during the time of what some call
the 'first Jewish holocaust',
a forty-year time period when the Assyrians tortured and persecuted the Jews in
Palestine, from 740-700 B.C.

They were savage.

And it was during THIS difficult time that Isaiah offered
God's visions of hope, justice and peace!

Isn't that wild?

Think about that—doesn't that make God's promises more meaningful?

If you read through Isaiah,

Or sing through Handel's 'Messiah', whose lyrics come from Isaiah,

You get a picture of what Isaiah wanted us to imagine.

And if you had to sum it up in one word, that word would be **SHALOM**.

Shalom is the Hebrew term for peace,

but it means more than just the absence of war or conflict.

It is about ***wholeness, and healing.***

The wholeness of ***body, mind, and spirit***—the wholeness of ***community.***

Shalom is something that God's people longed for during the time of Isaiah, but isn't it something that we ***long for TODAY?***

Especially at Christmas?

Especially during times of hardship, or suffering?

Today we also remember the powerful words of ***John the Baptist***—who came to '*prepare the way of the Lord*', by preparing the hearts of people to meet their Savior.

During this Advent season,

It ***makes sense to remember John preparing the way for Jesus.***

In some ways, John fulfills Isaiah's prophecies—about a man of righteousness.

John was a man of righteousness and justice,

Who came to prepare the way

for the ***ultimate Man of justice, Jesus.***

John had ***a very special message*** for the people awaiting their Savior.

Isaiah's message was one of hope, peace, and justice.

John's message was about ***repentance.***

Repentance---what does that word make you think of?

Does it make you think of being sorry?

Or feeling guilty?

The Greek word for repentance in the Bible is ***metanoia***—which means ***to change one's mind, or re-orient yourself.***

Repentance is not just about being sorry you messed up, and it's NOT about feeling guilty.

It's about a reorientation of life,

A new attitude, and outlook.

It's really about seeing things from ***God's point of view***, and not our own.

Have you ever thought about *repentance that way*?

You know, what if we NEED the visions of *Isaiah AND John the Baptist*?

What if they are *pathways to wholeness and healing*?

Especially at Christmas?

Isaiah's promises—are *transformative, and life-giving*.

⁶ *The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.....*

⁹ *They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord*

What if BELIEVED these words?

What if we considered their context,

how they were written to people who were *suffering, and hurting*?

What if we heard them,

As God's word to *US---in 2025?*

To all of us who need *healing, wholeness, and shalom*?

I want you to think for a minute,

About the healing that YOU need, right now.

Not just healing that your friends and family need—*but what YOU need.*

Sometimes we have to put on our own oxygen mask first, right?

As you think about that, we're going to have

a time of prayer for healing and wholeness.

This will be a short time of prayer—

when I encourage you to ask God for the *healing that YOU need.*

As you pray, remember the *healing touch of Jesus,*

who reached out to those needing health and wholeness,

whether it was *body, mind or spirit.*

The *prayers* we offer today are for *shalom.*

And as we do it—

I encourage you to do something that *reminds your body*
of Jesus' healing in your life.

We're Protestant, but maybe ***making the sign of the cross*** on yourself would be powerful today.
 Or the sign of the ***cross on your forehead***, as I do for people being baptized.
 Maybe ***hold up your hands up*** to God,
 or ***put your palms face up*** to receive God's blessing.

We all need God's healing and wholeness—
 And ***WORDS*** have great power—
 there's a reason Jesus was called the Word of God.
ACTIONS have great power.
 It's why Jesus touched people in need.

So let's stop to pray,
 And bring our cares and concerns to God,
 To receive the shalom that God can bring. ***LET US PRAY....***

God of wholeness and healing,
 Bring your healing power to our hearts and lives, today.
 Hear our prayers ---for our bodies, minds, and spirits.
 So many of us are ***tired, and stressed***, we are pulled in many directions.
 Some of us have ***bodies*** that are hurting, and weary.
 Some of us have ***hearts and minds*** that are struggling.
 Some of us have ***families*** in need of reconciliation, peace, security.
Hear our prayers for wholeness.
 For ***shalom***.

We ask for shalom---in our homes, our schools, and our community.
 We ask shalom for our ***nation***—because we are so divided right now.
 Bring your peace to our ***world***—where war ravages millions of people.
 Bring ***food*** to the hungry,
 And ***comfort*** to the grieving.
 Bring ***housing*** to those who are cold, and ***clothing*** to those in need—
 and help us ***not just pray*** about this, but help us to be the ***agents of change***
 to make these things happen.
 Use us, Lord to answer prayers offered this day.

As we come to you today, God of grace,
 We lift our hands and hearts.
 We ask that our bodies would welcome your presence.

We invite your shalom into our lives, O God

And we pray all of this in trust—knowing that you hear us, and you respond.

You always respond.

We pray it in the name of Jesus, our Savior, the one who brings peace on earth.

For the Good News of healing and wholeness,

All God's people pray together, Amen.