

Introduction

Outside Capitol Hill construction noise can be heard. The platform for Joe Biden's inaugural address is being built. Every few years, throngs of hundreds of thousands of people descend on Washington D.C. to see new presidents take office, just like 2009 with President Obama and 2017 with President Trump. With the pandemic still raging, this year, however, will be decidedly different and decidedly smaller. Washington D.C.'s convention center, normally home to the inaugural ball, has been transformed into an emergency field hospital. Indoor events will very likely need to be dramatically scaled back. Nonetheless, people are getting ready. The city has repaved Pennsylvania Ave; media stands are being built in Lafayette Square; hotels are hoping any increase in visitors can help offset steep losses suffered during the economic downturn. Our American democracy doesn't have kings, but presidential inauguration preparations are the closest thing we have to a king's arrival. Today we focus on how Isaiah prepared the ancient people of Judah for the King's arrival, which pointed ahead to how John the Baptist would prepare the people of his day for the King's arrival. Therefore,

Get Ready for the King's Arrival!

a comforting king ... a glorious king ... an eternal king ... a shepherd-king

A Comforting King

Once he opens the door at 8 pm, you can see it on her face. He braces for an onslaught of attacks. "Where have you been? Why do you always abandon me to fend for myself? You're never at home anymore. You spend so much time at work it's like I don't have a husband anymore. Never mind, dinner is already done, and the kids are already in bed." His puzzled look quickly flips into defensiveness. "If I didn't work so much, you wouldn't have dinner!" "That's not the man I married! We had a much better marriage when we had less money and less stuff going on." Then it escalates to the d word. "If I'm such a lousy husband, maybe you should divorce me!" Sobbing, the words trail off, "I just don't know..."

Throughout the Old Testament, the relationship between God and his people is depicted as a marriage. What once began on the most joyful day of their lives, the Exodus from Egypt, eventually descends into the d word. At the beginning of Isaiah, he pronounces judgment on the people of Judah and predicts that just as Israel was exiled by Assyria, so Judah will be exiled by Babylon. In her sin Judah left the marriage relationship with her husband, and it culminated in 586 B.C. when its precious capital was destroyed and its beloved temple burned. Now Isaiah fast forwards and writes to these future exiles about their comforting king. ***"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."*** Comfort is repeated twice to reassure Judah. It forms a fitting theme to this entire second section of Isaiah after the first section focused so much on judgment. Judah thought maybe they couldn't call God "their" God after all that had happened, but they were wrong. God speaks to their hearts. What to say in such calm, intimate, caring fashion? Three things. Your warfare with Babylon – most importantly, with God – is over. Your sin's debt has been paid. The comforting king's forgiveness is more than enough.

It does not matter how many times you have sinfully raised your voice at the Lord and threatened the “d” word. Like a marriage counselor putting this fractured relationship back on track, your comforting king single-handedly takes the initiative. He makes no demands of you, no threats that you need to go back to the beginning when you were head-over-heels in love, but he simply reaches his arms around you to tenderly comfort you, “The warfare between me and you is over. The guilt and punishment you incurred has been taken away. No amount of sin is ever too great for my forgiveness.” Get ready for your comforting king to arrive.

A Glorious King

Pass over I-94, past Target, past Meijer, along Ann Arbor-Saline Rd., you’ll quickly see a massive construction site. I’m not talking about the new apartments; I’m talking about the new subdivision. Estates at Bella Vista – sounds fancy. It began as farmland. But the rolling terrain needs to be leveled off, the hills removed, the low spots filled in. Soil sampling needs to be done to make sure the ground can support soaring model homes. Roads and water lines need to be built. All those preparations need to happen before excited homeowners move in.

Much like a new subdivision, ancient heralds and messengers would prepare the way, the streets, and the roads before a king’s arrival. ***“In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.”*** To get from exile in Babylon back home in Judah, you would take the long way around, up along the Euphrates River and then down along the Mediterranean Sea. Why wouldn’t you go straight across? There’s a huge wilderness in the way, the Arabian desert. Yet Isaiah is prophesying this glorious King will make a bee-line straight through the wilderness back home. With poetic imagery, the mountains and valleys will be leveled and the rough and bumpy roads smoothed. The whole point is to create an easy approach for the coming king. This is the prophetic background for John the Baptist’s ministry in the wilderness of Judah. Just as these ancient heralds would go on ahead of a coming king to prepare the roads and the towns for his arrival, so John the Baptist’s message of repentance prepared the hearts of the people for Jesus’ arrival. Many centuries prior to that, the Lord displayed his glory at the tabernacle in the Sinai wilderness. Once the exiles return home, the Lord would display his glory again. Once the Messiah would come, the Lord would display his glory yet again. Once the Messiah will come again on the Last Day, everyone will see the glorious king.

So is your life’s terrain more like rolling farmland or a smooth new subdivision? What are the obstacles in the path of Christ’s coming? A lack of honesty about your sins? Too much clutter for the Christmas season? So much exasperation about the pandemic? No amount of boulders in the path, no amount of rocky wilderness terrain, no amount of steep hairpin turns can get in the way of your glorious king. He will remove those sinful barriers to come to you. Even more glorious than the sight of Judean exiles returning home at last is the glorious sight of the Christ-child born in Bethlehem for the world. Get ready for your glorious king to arrive.

An Eternal King

Since we stayed home this year for Thanksgiving, we had some extra time on Thanksgiving weekend to set up Christmas decorations. On Sunday I went down to the basement to get the tree. It was easy. No trips to a local farm, or Costco, or Lowe’s. Just open a box. Yes, we have an artificial tree now. It lasts and lasts – theoretically for your whole life. It

may not smell as nice, but eventually the fragrant smell goes away anyways. The trunk licks up the water, the needles fall to the ground, the branches dry up, until it dies away on the curb.

That's life. Everything eventually fades away because we're not eternal. ***"All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."*** Isaiah metaphorically compares people to grass and flowers of the field. The point is clear: they don't last, so people won't last. The colorful springtime flowers and the bright, lush green summer grass eventually wither and fade away into a brown dying winter mass. So every human person and every human institution will fade away from their glory days. That's a sobering thought, but in Isaiah's day, it was also a comforting thought. Assyria and Babylon were the flowering powers of the day. Now they have been reduced to the dusty pages of history books. But the eternal King never fades or dies away.

Still today, world powers come and go. Presidents come and go. Societal movements come and go. So too, you and I come and go. Every one of us will eventually fade away into old age and die away. God's Word never will. Its gracious promises of comfort, forgiveness, and protection will never change, no matter how much this world changes. That means you can count on it now and always. His word endures forever because he endures forever. Get ready for your eternal king to arrive.

A Shepherd-King

This past week, I came home after not seeing my daughter all day. My caring wife offered to do the dishes, which I normally do, so I could spend extra time with Charlotte. Down in the basement, like she usually does, she heads to our large bookcase, grabs a book, throws it in my lap, turns around, and without hesitation plops herself in my lap. So I gathered my little child in my arms, close to my heart, for daddy-daughter time.

In the ancient world, shepherds would care for their sheep like fathers care for their daughters. ***"See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."*** Many years ago, David was chosen king while he was still out tending the sheep and his brothers were lining up before Samuel. Instead, this shepherd from Bethlehem would rule in Jerusalem. From then on, this image of a shepherd-king was impressed on the minds of Judah. Jerusalem is the bringer of good news who announces to the rest of the Judean towns that a shepherd-king is coming. His right arm, a picture of kingly power throughout the Old Testament, is the same arm that will gently scoop up his people into his lap. Mommy ewe lambs who have nursing young are the most vulnerable, yet these are the ones the shepherd-king leads, guides, and cares for.

Your shepherd-king cares for you as much as a parent who gently scoops up a toddler into your lap for story time, as much as a shepherd who gently scoops up a wobbly lamb still nursing at his mother. He will stoop down to your level. He will not be harsh with you. He will care for you more than anything in the world. He wants daddy-daughter time with you, and it just makes his day. Get ready for your shepherd-king to arrive.

Conclusion

We Americans may be thankful that we got rid of British kings long ago and now have democratic elections. But this King isn't so bad. He's a comforting king, a glorious king, an eternal king, a shepherd-king, who doesn't want to reside in his distant palace but take up a home in your heart. So get ready for him to arrive! Amen.