

A King to Rally Behind

Isaiah 11:1-10 (NIV)

¹ 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 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, 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.

Transport yourself back to the 8th century B.C. You are an Israelite. You've grown up hearing the stories of great King David, of his conquests, of his rule. You worship at Solomon's magnificent Temple for all the major festivals during the year. Your current King, a man named Ahaz, is not so good. He did not follow David's ways. He promoted worship of other gods. He even sacrificed his own son to one of them. Makes you want to throw up. Even with this bad king, you cling to what you grew up learning, that the Messiah, the Savior, was coming from King David's line. As long as a descendant of David sits on that throne, there's hope. There's a king coming who we can rally behind.

At the same time, though, while Ahaz continues to forsake our true God, we see our borders shrinking. In fact, there is a foreign power on the rise from the northeast, the Assyrians. Their violence and brutality is quickly becoming a thing of horror stories. They have their eyes on the other major power that's southwest of us – Egypt. We're in the middle. We're the buffer state. Any invading army is going to come through our land, and you can bet that they won't march through peacefully. What can we do? Our nation is in no condition to fight a war of two fronts against these two superpowers! Who do we put our trust in to save us? Who will we rally behind?

We have a history with the Egyptians. They held our people as slaves for nearly 400 years. They tried to destroy our people, drowning our baby boys in the Nile, making impossible demands of us as slave labor. Then the LORD brought the 10 plagues upon Egypt and we were freed. That was some 600 years ago. Do we call it ancient history, water under the bridge? Do we rally behind our former oppressive masters or do we ally ourselves with this growing Assyrian empire? Their methods are extreme, but effective. They are a frightening group of people. Would they even honor an alliance or would they just trounce us once our usefulness is over? This feels like a lesser of two evils sort of decision.

"The lesser of two evils." Seems like a phrase that I've heard a lot lately, almost always in the same breath as politics. What decided your vote this year? Who did you rally behind? Did you rally behind someone who you thought had the moral high ground? Did you rally behind someone who seemed to think like you, say what you've been saying all along? Did you rally behind the person who seemed the most capable of carrying out their position? Did you rally behind the person because there was something about them, some kind of charisma, that drew you to them? We look to these people to do the jobs that we need done, jobs that I'm not qualified to do, that I can't do. How awful it feels, then, when I feel like my rallying call is to get behind the person who I deem the lesser of two evils. I don't like it. It should not have to be this way. Why is there not a leader who I think is good enough? But these are my choices, right? What else am I going to do when it comes to rallying behind a leader?

As the Israelites were trying to figure this out, Isaiah came along and blew up their choices. He spoke for God as he foretold that the Egyptians would be no help and that the Assyrians would cut down Judah. The King David family tree would soon become a stump because those descendants as well as the Israelites kept looking to others to rely on, to serve, to worship, just as their current King Ahaz was doing. If God did cut down the family tree of David, then how would the Messiah ever come? How would the Israelites ever be saved with David's family tree cut down to a stump? Their choices over alliances are now gone. Who can they turn to? Who can they rally behind? There is no hope.

The Israelites were rallying behind earthly rulers and earthly powers to save them. Who do you rally behind to save you? Do you rally behind presidents and congressmen and representatives and supreme court justices to save you from the wickedness of the world? Do you look at the Constitution to save you by maintaining your rights no matter who our leaders do? Any of these can become corrupted. Any of these can be cut down at any point. Then, what will we do? Who can we turn to? Who can we rally behind to save us? Is there any hope? When we look to anything other than God to rally behind and save us, there is no hope.

To a people with no hope, God gives hope through Isaiah: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." (verse 1) From something cut down, from something dead, God will bring life. That Davidic dynasty, that kingly line, that the Israelites were looking to to save them, there will be life again. A shoot will come up. A Branch, a new growth, will appear. He will bear fruit. A king from David's family line is still coming even though it looked like all hope of it was dead.

This shoot from the stump of Jesse, David's father, this Branch will be a king unlike any other king. "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." (verse 2) God is going to rest on this king, a king with the best traits to make him not only a wise ruler, but also a capable one. "He will delight in the fear of the LORD." He's going to be a king who does God's will, who studies it day and night, who lives his whole life by it. He will approach every situation looking to do the will of God. "He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth." (verses 3-4) He will not rule in self-interest. He will not rule by hearsay. He will not even judge by what his eyes see in case something looks as though it were not. Instead, all of his ruling, all of his judging, will be based on righteousness and justice. All his decisions will be right. All of them will be truth because righteousness and faithfulness never leave his body. "He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked." (verse 4) In his judging and all his decisions evil will not prevail. The enemies of God will be slain. He will deliver his people.

Under the rule of this Branch, this shoot from the stump of Jesse, there will be unprecedented peace. Not only will hostilities with other people cease, but even nature itself will be at peace. To think for a moment that you could say to your kid, "Yeah, it's okay to play with the vipers' nest. Don't worry; they won't harm you." To picture a world where predator and prey are no longer distinctions. Violence is done away. "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain." (verses 9) That's a peace that we've never seen, a peace that the Root of Jesse will bring.

How will this happen? When will this happen? "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." (verse 9) It will happen when the earth is filled with the knowledge of the LORD. This means people coming to faith in God, to know this king who is coming, this Branch who springs up from the root of Jesse, to listen to Isaiah's message of deliverance and help as he said only a couple of chapters previously, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14) This king is none other than Jesus Christ, true God, true Man, the Immanuel – God with us. "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." (verse 10) Now that is a king to rally behind – not a choice of the lesser of two evils, but a leader who is absolutely good in every aspect, a king unlike any other to have ever existed.

Isaiah looked ahead and saw the coming of this king, the Root of Jesse, who will stand as a banner for the peoples, that nations will rally to him, not just Israel, but all of us. Isaiah gave this message to assure the Israelites that you should not look to the lesser of two evils, to Assyria and Egypt, to save you, to rally behind. Instead, wait. Even though the dynasty of King David will be reduced to a stump, the Branch will rise up from that dead stump. He will come. He will slay the wicked. He will save you and all nations.

The Israelites would have to wait another 700+ years to see that shoot rise up and become the Branch bearing fruit. They were told to wait for the King to come, to rally behind the rising shoot to be saved. He will come. That's the same message that Isaiah has for us. Christ has come as a babe in the manger. He grew to be a man. He bore the fruit of righteousness as he did the will of his Father perfectly. He suffered and died to create peace for us with God. He will come again on the Last Day, on Judgment Day, to bring this unprecedented peace over the whole earth as was foretold here. The wicked will be slain. He will judge us, believers, based on the righteousness that he has given. Neither man nor animal will ever harm or destroy as we rally behind this King on his holy mountain.

Don't settle for the lesser of two evils to be your Savior, your king, your leader. Don't rally behind earthly powers and authorities, behind those who can't save you. Instead, wait for the Root of Jesse. Rally behind him. Put your trust in him. He is coming, and he is a King worth waiting for. Amen.