

AWAIT GOD'S FUTURE.

**ADVENT
SERMON SERIES**

AN ADVENT/CHRISTMAS SERMON SERIES BASED ON ISAIAH



Concordia
Seminary
ST. LOUIS

SAMPLE

AWAIT GOD'S FUTURE

AN ADVENT-CHRISTMAS SERMON SERIES BASED ON ISAIAH

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ADVENT WEEK 1

Isaiah 36-37—"Yahweh Will Save His Zion"

ADVENT WEEK 2

Isaiah 13:9-13, 19; 14:1—"The Day of Yahweh Will Come"

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CHRISTMAS EVE

Isaiah 12:4-6—"O Give Thanks unto Yahweh"

CHRISTMAS DAY

Isaiah 16:4-5 — "The Righteous King on David's Throne"

Advent is the time of the church year that concentrates on the future tense. The overall theme of the series is "Await God's Future." It is God's future that we are yearning for based on what God himself has announced. God's future is our hope, not human-made futures, not human-concocted utopian dreams, not future visions depending on human technology, engineering, and science. The overall goal of the series is to enable people to hear some of the future-tense announcements of the ancient prophet Isaiah, so that these ancient words will instill in the hearts and minds of the listeners repentance, faith, and hope in the coming of Yahweh. Isaiah bids us: "Await God's Future."

The texts come from the prophet of ancient Israel named Isaiah son of Amoz, from parts of his book generally unfamiliar to people. For each text I give some preliminary notes¹. The sermons are sermon starters. The pastor will need to fill in with additional material based on the local context. My goal is to stimulate some homiletical ideas and approaches. In this series we want to practice a double hearing, to hear the prophet preaching to his original

¹ The material of this series is based on Paul R. Raabe, *Isaiah 13-27* (forthcoming in the Concordia Commentary series published by Concordia Publishing House).

listeners and to hear his words continue to speak to us through Christ now 2700 years later in North America. These ancient words were the true word of God then, and they remain the true word of God now. The season of Advent is a good time to hear the prophets of ancient Israel announce the future. In this series we will let Isaiah ben Amoz move us and lead us to respond properly to the future he was announcing. We now live in the time between the times, in the “now” of the age of fulfillment and in the “not yet” waiting for the future consummation. Each one of Isaiah’s passages has already been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah and we already enjoy its blessings now by faith. At the same time, we await its full empirical and visible realization when Jesus returns in glory. Isaiah can help us prepare and wait for that future.

Isaiah ben Amoz

Isaiah ben Amoz was called into the prophetic ministry by the Holy One of Israel. That call came during the year that King Uzziah of Jerusalem died in 740 BC (Is 6). Isaiah conducted his public ministry in Jerusalem during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Is 1:1). Isaiah had access to the palace in Jerusalem. The two major narratives in the book concentrate on Isaiah’s interactions with King Ahaz (Is 7–8) and King Hezekiah (Is 36–39). Therefore one historical audience was the king and advisers in the palace in Jerusalem. No doubt another historical audience was the people of Israel who would gather at the temple site. A third historical audience comprised envoys from Gentile nations seeking relations and alliances with the Jerusalem palace and Gentile traders and merchants. We have no record of Isaiah traveling to other lands, but we do know that other lands had dealings in Jerusalem. We should not think of eighth-century BC Jerusalem as an isolated, backwoods town. It was a bustling city full of activity and well known in the ancient Near East. Archaeology reveals that eighth-century BC Jerusalem was a rather large walled city for that day, about 150 acres with a considerable expansion to the western hill.²

Isaiah’s context in the second half of the eighth century was dominated by the kings of Assyria and their military power. Especially three kings of Assyria loom large, Tiglath-pileser III (744–727), Sargon II (722–705) and Sennacherib (705–681). They turned their sights to the west, which meant trouble for Phoenicia, Philistia, Damascus and Aram, Moab, and Arabian tribes to the east. It also meant disaster for the northern kingdom of Israel and for Judah and became a large threat to Jerusalem itself. The campaigns of Sargon II and Sennacherib and the historical narratives concerning them in Isaiah 20 and 36–37 are especially crucial for understanding the material. The other key internal Isaianic text is Isaiah 39 and its prediction of a future king of Babylon.

² Avraham Faust, “Society and Culture in the Kingdom of Judah during the Eighth Century” in *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah*, ed. Zev I. Farber and Jacob L. Wright (Atlanta: SBL, 2018), 181. Faust also gives a drawing of eighth-century BC Jerusalem

ADVENT WEEK 1

Isaiah 36–37—“Yahweh Will Save His Zion”

Preliminary Notes

In some texts Isaiah encourages us to think in terms of time, “before” and “after,” the way things are now and the way things will be in the future when God carries out his promised actions. In other texts Isaiah encourages us to think in terms of space and location. Isaiah contrasts the destiny of two different groups of people, those outside of Zion and those inside of Zion. This spatial contrast appears frequently in Isaiah 13–27.

God will defeat the enemies of Israel and protect his people Israel (Is 14:24–25; 17:12–14; 24:21–23; 26:20–27:5). The end of the oppressor will lead to the restoration of Israel and the messianic age to come (16:4–5; 25:5–9). Protected Israel will bear fruit for the whole world (27:6). The end of arrogant Babylon (13:1–22) is set in contrast to the future restoration of Israel (14:1–3). The death of the king of Babylon will give relief to all who suffered under his tyranny (Is 14:4–8). Zion is a place for all Gentiles to enjoy the feast and eternal life, but those who remain in their own place and outside of Zion will suffer shame and humiliation (25:6–12).

At the time of Isaiah, the label “Zion” referred to Jerusalem. Isaiah set forth a complex theology regarding Zion/Jerusalem. He viewed Zion/Jerusalem from two different perspectives and with two different futures. One perspective sees Zion/Jerusalem as the place where Yahweh has graciously located his presence among and for his people, where his own people in faith come before his presence and trust in his promises. There is safe refuge in this Zion/Jerusalem from the external enemies of God’s city. The second picture sees Zion/Jerusalem as a city like other city-states, full of rebellious sinners. To reveal this angle Isaiah juxtaposed a judgment speech against Jerusalem (Is 22) with a judgment speech against the Gentile Phoenician city of Tyre (Is 23). The iniquity of Isaiah’s Jerusalem and his original hearers would be held against them until they died (22:14). This Zion/Jerusalem must be refined through fire and even destroyed, then rebuilt and glorified.

One may ask: Which is it? Zion/Jerusalem will not be destroyed, or Zion/Jerusalem will be destroyed and later rebuilt. Isaiah could affirm both statements, because he could view the same city from two different perspectives. The first perspective views the city as God’s city which external enemies cannot destroy. The second perspective views the city as internally full of impenitent, rebellious sinners. We must distinguish between the two but not separate them. One may say that the Zion/Jerusalem as God’s dwelling place with his people had located itself in, with, and under the Zion/Jerusalem as a this-worldly city-state. Hence Isaiah could speak of this Zion/Jerusalem as having two different futures. The first theological perspective (historically speaking) exhibited itself in the protection of Zion/Jerusalem during the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, while the second theological perspective showed itself in the destruction of Zion/Jerusalem during the Babylonian crisis of 587 BC (as predicted by Isaiah in chapter 39) and then later rebuilding during the postexilic period.

With this sermon we will explore the first perspective. The suggested sermon hymn is **LSB 648 (“Glorious Things of You Are Spoken”)**. The text is the narrative given in **Isaiah 36–37**. I will use ESV except substitute “Yahweh” for “LORD.” The account gives a vivid historical instance of God’s theological promise at work already in the days of Isaiah. The place is Judah, and the time is the year 701 BC. The king of Assyria, Sennacherib (705–681 BC), and his multinational army are there in Judah threatening Jerusalem.

SAMPLE

ADVENT WEEK 1 SERMON

based on Isaiah 36-37

“Yahweh Will Save His Zion”

Imagine yourself in the city of Jerusalem in the year 701 BC. The city is a bustling, fairly large and well-known city in the ancient Near East. Archaeologists estimate that it was about 150 acres in size. The temple is there, the temple built by King Solomon over 250 years earlier. Outside of Jerusalem in Judah is the presence of a terrifying and menacing army, the multinational army of Assyria. The kings of Assyria have conquered the surrounding lands, including the northern kingdom of Israel. Their practice was to conquer and deport the local populations to distant places. The northern Israelites were already taken into exile. In 701 BC the king of Assyria, Sennacherib, had already destroyed forty-six towns of Judah and deported over 200,000 people of Judah. Now he wants Jerusalem to surrender to Assyrian rule. Their surrender would be less of a bother for him, rather than having to carry out a military attack and go to all the fuss of destroying the city's walls. It would be simpler if Jerusalem just surrenders. Sennacherib was currently in the process of destroying Lachish, a prominent city of Judah, located to the west. In order to persuade Jerusalem to surrender Sennacherib sent the Rabshakeh, a high-ranking official in the Assyrian government.

King Hezekiah believed in Yahweh, the God of Moses and the Prophets, the God of Isaiah, the God whose temple was there in Jerusalem. Earlier when Hezekiah had been seriously ill and near death he prayed to Yahweh, and Yahweh heard his prayer. The episode is recorded in Isaiah chapter 38. Yahweh promised to give Hezekiah fifteen more years. And he made this promise: “I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and I will defend this city” (38:6). King Hezekiah believed that promise from the true God. Hezekiah believed the theology he was taught, the theology of Isaiah the prophet. And King Hezekiah told the rest of Jerusalem this promise. Now the Assyrian official was trying to undermine confidence in that theology.

Let's imagine ourselves in Jerusalem in 701 BC. We the people of Jerusalem live under the rule of King Hezekiah. Isaiah 36-37 records the speeches given by the Rabshakeh, the Assyrian official. Let's listen to the arguments of the Rabshakeh. He did his homework. He knows something about the theology of King Hezekiah. Now he tries to undermine our confidence in that theology. His goal is to persuade us to surrender. Will we surrender or will we believe the theology we have been taught?

Will you believe the theology you were taught from this pulpit Sunday after Sunday? Will you believe the theology you were taught at Sunday school? Will you believe the theology you were taught in your catechism classes and confirmation classes? Will you believe the theology you were taught in adult Bible class? Will you believe the theology you were taught

every Sunday through the liturgy and hymns? Will you believe the promises of God? Or will you surrender to the voices of the world? Will you become a Christian in name only, whose mind and heart and will are actually shaped by the voices of the world more than the Lord's voice? We are all inundated by the world's voices every minute of every day. They come to us 24/7 via TV, the radio, our computer screens, our phones, in countless ways. Many Christians simply end up conforming to the world and its ways of thinking. Many Christians basically surrender to the Rabshakeh, the Assyrian official. Will you surrender? Or will you believe in God's promise to save his Zion?

Let's listen to the Rabshakeh's speech. He is trying to undermine confidence in the claims made by King Hezekiah. King Hezekiah tells Jerusalem to trust in their God, Yahweh, the God of Israel. Our God promised to deliver Jerusalem, his city, his Zion, from the king of Assyria and his army. But the Rabshakeh claims that is all a bunch of nonsense.

The Rabshakeh says to Jerusalem: You are no match to the might of Assyria. If you rely on Egypt, they're a broken reed. They can't and won't save you. If you think your own military prowess can deliver you, the king of Assyria will spot you 2000 horses, if you even have that many horsemen (36:6-9). The Assyrian official speaks to Jerusalem:

Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! Thus says the king: "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in Yahweh by saying 'Yahweh will surely deliver us. This city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' Do not listen to Hezekiah. . . . Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying 'Yahweh will deliver us.' Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that Yahweh should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?" (36:13-20)

The Rabshakeh mocks the theology of Isaiah and King Hezekiah. He says: "Wake up, Zion. Resistance is futile. Your god is no match to the overpowering, unstoppable might of Assyria. The king of Assyria has already conquered countless other cities. Their gods were no match. None of their gods were able to deliver them. What makes you think your god is any different. Your god can not deliver you from Assyria. No god can. So surrender, Jerusalem!"

The challenge from the voices of the world remains basically the same. "What rules the world is worldly power and might, the economy, politics, the daily rat race, the kingdoms of the world. That is what calls the shots. Your theology is a bunch of nonsense, wishful thinking, made-up dreams. All religions are the same. Forget that religious poppycock. The world and its ways rule, not your god. So conform to the way the world thinks and works!"

Well, what happened? King Hezekiah and Jerusalem trusted in their God, Yahweh. King Hezekiah brought the matter before God and prayed:

O Yahweh of hosts, God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Yahweh, and hear; open your eyes, O Yahweh, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Yahweh, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Yahweh our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are Yahweh. (37:16-20//2 Kgs 19:15-19)

Then what happened? The God of ancient Israel, the God of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, was not just another run-of-the-mill god on the smorgasbord of ancient gods and goddesses. Yes, the kings of Assyria conquered other gods, for they were no gods but simply statues of wood and stone. Big deal, the kings of Assyria conquered a bunch of statues. But now they were facing the true God, the almighty Creator who made the heavens and the earth. And the true God heard Hezekiah's prayer and acted in a mighty way: "And the angel of Yahweh went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies."

What happened to Sennacherib, the king of Assyria? He returned home to Nineveh. And the text records that twenty years later in 681 BC, while "he was worshiping in the house [temple] of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword" (37:36-38//2 Kgs 19:35-37). How ironic! How humorous! Sennacherib's own god could not even deliver him from being assassinated in his own god's temple.

But the God of ancient Israel, the God of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah is not impotent. He is not a bunch of religious made-up mumble-jumble. He is the true God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. He acted upon his own promises. He carried them out. They were not empty words. God fulfills his promises. He came mighty to save his people, to save his Zion, from the formidable Assyria. Jerusalem did not save herself. Her own might was no match to Assyria. The Rabshakeh was right about that. Her salvation, her deliverance was due only to her God and his faithfulness to his promises.

Believe the promises of your God, the true God, given by his ancient prophet Isaiah. That day of deliverance of Zion in 701 BC was one of the greatest miracles recorded in Holy Scripture. That mighty act of salvation gave a foretaste, an anticipation, a preview, a down payment of a coming act of God to save as frequently promised by Isaiah, the time when God will save from death itself, from sin itself, from all the might of the world to oppress and rule. This Advent season we look forward to that future day of salvation.

In fact, that future day of salvation has already entered into history ahead of time. Through Jesus of Nazareth, God's saving work already took place. As Jesus said: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33). He has already saved us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He did it by living the perfect life in our place and by offering himself up as our substitute. He did it by willingly allowing himself to be crucified and put to death by the world. He saved us "from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death that we may be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." You do not belong to the world. You belong to Jesus the Lord, "as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity." Jesus is the victorious Lord over all.

He now gives you a share in his victory. Here in his new and greater Zion, in his new and greater Jerusalem, he gathers you into his saving presence and gives you the blessings of his salvation. As the epistle lesson for Sunday states: "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9). He did it through Holy baptism. He does it through the gospel proclamation. He does it through the Lord's Supper. Here in Zion among his people in his presence he gives salvation. And this gift now is the guarantee that one day Jesus will come again in visible glory to save you on the last day. Believe the true theology you were taught. Don't surrender to the voices of the world.

By the power of the Holy Spirit trust in the promises from the true God spoken by Isaiah his prophet of old. The true God will come mighty to save. Trust in God's promises as they were fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth, God's own Son in the flesh. Trust in God's promises that will one day reach their consummation when the Lord returns in visible glory. Yahweh will save his Zion. Amen.