

Unto Us a Child Is Born

Isaiah 9:2-7

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Our daughter, Hayley, turns 30 this coming April. I have tried to be a good father to her, but she still bears the scars of some of my mistakes. When she was first in middle school, she went away on a big church retreat with kids from all over the Houston area. There were a couple hundred kids together at this camp, and right at the beginning they called everyone's name and assigned them to a small group. Hayley's name was never called. It breaks my heart to think of her standing there while everyone else heard their name, was put in a group, and began making friends. What especially breaks my heart is that I had filled out all of her paperwork. She was registered. They should have called her name. Well, it turns out I was responsible for why her name was not called. Apparently, I have bad hand writing. If truth be told, I have terrible handwriting, on the verge of being illegible. When the leaders of the camp finally realized this poor 13 year old was standing all alone waiting for her name to be called, they tried to figure out the problem. The problem was not whether she knew her name. That was easy, Hayley Eberly. But there was no Hayley Eberly in the registration. What they did have was one form for a girl who had never answered when her name was called. That name was Hogles Eberts. I'm actually glad I wasn't there. I can only imagine the look of disgust I would have had to endure as Hayley said, "I think that might be me. My dad has really bad handwriting."

An incident like that could leave some scars. Fortunately, Hayley is not easily scarred. In fact, she adopted that name as her nickname. Her best friend felt left out, as all she had was a normal name, so she traded in her given name of Olivia and became Sven. Hogles and Sven took a potentially embarrassing moment and parleyed it into a fun and memorable moniker that endures to this day. When Instagram came into being, Hayley chose to go by Hogles Eberts. You can only imagine how thankful I am for her resiliency and her sense of humor.

Last December our oldest son, Jake, turned 32. He has always loved sports. I wanted to do something fun for his birthday, and so I bought him a basketball jersey. When he was growing up we lived in California, and everyone in California during the 1980's loved the Los Angeles Lakers. And the star of the Lakers wore number 32. You might remember him. His name was Earvin Johnson. You can't really blame him for doing what Hayley did and adopting a new name. Nobody knows him as Earvin Johnson. He's Magic.

For his 32nd birthday, I sent Jake a Magic Johnson jersey, #32. I also sent him a subscription to Sports Illustrated. We used to wait every Friday for SI to arrive in the mail, and we raced to see who got to read it first. I was pretty happy. I'm not the world's best gift giver, but I felt like I got it right for Jake's 32nd birthday.

When we visited him last spring, I was sitting in his apartment, killing time while he got ready. On his coffee table was a magazine. It was Sports Illustrated. It was the very magazine I ordered for him. I picked it up and was feeling sentimental. I love our kids. Even something as small as a magazine gets me emotional. As I was looking at his magazine, I saw the mailing label. All of the sudden I let out an audible gasp. I couldn't believe my eyes. The magazine was addressed to Salo Eberts. Apparently, in the last 15 years my handwriting has not improved one bit. In fact, it's probably getting worse.

I took a picture and sent it to the whole family, figuring it would get a laugh. Hayley Eberly, who is now Hayley Gilbert, her married name, wrote back. Good old Hogles Eberts, seeing that her brother was now Salo Eberts, she wrote. "Good one, Dad. You're the king of the long play." I had not heard that phrase before, but apparently in her mind I had this all planned out way back when I misspelled her name in 2000, and now in 2017 she thought I had put an exclamation mark by mangling her brother's name as well. She called it the long play. If only I was clever enough to have planned it all.

Hogles Eberts said I'm the king of the long play. I like that. I like that, even I know it's not the truth. This morning I want to tell you about the real king of the long play. And this king's long play was not played out over seventeen years. For us that might seem like a long play. But the long play I'm talking about is quite a bit longer than seventeen years. It is longer than seventy years. It is longer than seven hundred years. This is a real long play. Because it concerns you and me, I hope you will enjoy hearing about the long play that is before us this morning. And I hope you will be filled with wonder and awe for the King of the long play.

Isaiah the prophet is at the center of this long play. During the time when Ahaz was the king of Judah, sometime around 725 BCE, there was a crisis. During this time in the history of God's people, the nation of Israel had been divided into a northern and a southern kingdom. The northern kingdom continued to be referred to as Israel, and the southern kingdom was known as Judah. The kingdoms were divided, and that often resulted in them fighting against each other. When Ahaz was the king of Judah, one of the other nations, Aram joined forces with the northern kingdom, Israel, and they launched an offensive against Judah, the southern kingdom. The capital city

of Judah was Jerusalem, so this meant Jerusalem was under attack. This is all found beginning in chapter seven of Isaiah. When the offensive was launched, we are told the people of Judah were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. They were afraid. But then Isaiah the prophet appeared to Ahaz the king and said, “Be careful, keep calm and do not be afraid.” Isaiah told the king that they would not be defeated. All they had to do was stand firm and trust God.

God wants to be sure Ahaz knows that he can trust God, so God gives Ahaz a sign. The wording of the sign given to Ahaz might sound familiar to you. The sign is that a child will be born. And before this child even has a chance to start growing, the two kingdoms that are threatening Judah with their military might, they are going to falter and fail and be laid to waste. The reason I say you might be familiar with the promise of this child being born is that the actual passage, Isaiah 7:14 says, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

That promised birth of a child seems to be the impetus for the passage before us in Isaiah 9. As that child was born, as the promise literally came to life, a song of thanksgiving greeted the birth of the child. “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned....For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of the oppressors.” How? “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:2-7 selected)

It all played out in real time for Ahaz and the people of Judah. Their enemies rose up in battle, a child was born, the enemies were scattered, and the hopes placed in this child who was born were realized by peace and protection for an embattled people. This all played out for the kingdom of Judah in the days of Ahaz the king and Isaiah the prophet. But this morning, as we read this passage, we have the privilege of not only hearing about the play that was played out in the time of Isaiah, we have the privilege of exploring the long play of which this play is just one little part.

Because the play before us today, the one that took place during the time of Isaiah and Ahaz, because the play before us concerns the birth of a child, this passage invites us to go way back in the history of God’s people, back to the forming of the nation Israel, back to the call God gave to a man named Abraham, back to the beginning of the call to Abraham when his name was

still Abram. God called Abram and his wife Sarai to leave their country and follow God on a journey of faith. God sent Abram with a promise. “I will make you a great nation and I will bless you; I will make you great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed by you.” (Genesis 12:1-3) How will Abram become a great nation? Though his offspring, of course. He will have descendants. But we have already been let in on the tension that is at the center of the dramatic story of Abram and Sarai. They have no children. And they are old. They are both convinced they are past the point of having children. To an old and aged couple God says you will have descendants.

As with Ahaz, God promises a child will be born. For Ahaz that birth of a child happens relatively quickly. For Abram and Sarai, not so much. Not so fast. It takes some twenty five years for their child to be born. By the time the child is born they are obviously older than when they began, Sarah is somewhere around 90 and Abraham is a centurion, a full 100 years old when their child is born. But the child is born. His name is Isaac. His name means laughter. There is great rejoicing.

There is great rejoicing until there is one little hiccup. This little hiccup occurs in Genesis 22. As I remind you of this story, I guess I should say to trust in God’s long play, you really have to have faith. You have to have faith because things happen that just don’t make sense. As I say that, I realize how much it hurts when the things of life don’t make sense. I am hoping that we don’t give up on God when things do not make sense. What we will see this morning is that God is making a long play that will ultimately bring the greatest blessing to humanity, to all of humanity. But along the way there are mysteries so deep we struggle to understand. Like the day God tested Abraham in Genesis 22 and said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering.” (Genesis 22:2) For this long play to play out, we have to make the journey with Abraham, and with Isaac, up the mysterious Mount Moriah. Isaac will be bound on the altar on Mount Moriah and Abraham will raise the knife...only to find out at the crucial moment that God has something else in store. What we discover is that God did not send Abraham up on Mount Moriah to take the life of his son. God sent Abraham up on Mount Moriah to learn this foundational truth about what it means to be in relationship with God. On the mountain, when what is most precious to us is on the line, God provides. Right when it looks like Isaac will be sacrificed, and at the hand of his own father, a ram appears. God provides. Faith grows. Trust is rewarded.

I don't claim to understand the sovereignty of God, or how that sovereignty plays out. Mount Moriah always troubles me. Yet even as I struggle, I try to remember, this isn't the end. God is setting up a long play. Later, when David was king of Israel, hundreds of years later, when the kingdom was united, back in the good old days of the monarchy, something happened where David bought a piece of land from a fellow named Araunah the Jebusite. The land was in Jerusalem, although we don't find that out initially. It turns out the land David bought from Araunah the Jebusite is where the temple is eventually built in Jerusalem. And, in II Chronicles 3, when Solomon began to build the temple in Jerusalem, we read he built it on Mount Moriah, which is where the threshing floor was that belonged to Araunah the Jebusite. At least in one tradition, Mount Moriah is where the temple was finally built. The temple in Jerusalem is where the Israelites offered their sacrifices.

One day a man named Jesus was taken captive in Jerusalem. We believe Jesus was God's one and only Son. Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. Jesus was crucified on Mount Moriah, at least according to one tradition. When God's one and only Son was taken up the hill and crucified, no ram appeared to take his place. The New Testament tells us he himself was the sacrifice, a sacrifice of atonement. (Romans 3:25) In I Peter we read, "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God." (I Peter 3:18) I do not claim to understand the sovereignty of God, but I do find myself falling down at the foot of God, and at the foot of the cross. I find myself giving thanks to the God who stood in my place, who stood in our place, and offered his life. Somehow what Abraham experienced on Mount Moriah, what we all experience on Mount Moriah when we realize we cannot hold onto what is most precious in our lives, I find comfort and hope in knowing that God did not hold onto what was most precious to him. God sent his Beloved Son to die for us, for humanity, so that we might know there is a God who holds onto us, who holds us in the palm of his hand, who writes our name in the palm of his hand, and whose grip on our lives is so tight that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God which he has shown us in Christ Jesus.

To understand the long play of God we will come face to face with Jesus Christ as he suffers and dies on the cross. And yet it is not only his death. Today Isaiah has called our attention not to death, but to a birth. A child was born during the days of Ahaz the king of Judah and it was cause for great rejoicing. Oh, the birth of a child is a common theme. Sarah and Abraham had a boy and they named him laughter.. Under threat of a cruel Pharaoh who wanted to put every boy child to death, little old Moses floated out among the reeds and was rescued. And the long play continued. A couple left

Bethlehem because of a famine and in their time of exile in Moab the dad and the two sons died and life was filled with bitterness. But in Moab we meet a woman named Ruth. In God's providence and in God's sovereignty the long play continues. When the story returns to Bethlehem, a kinsman redeemer appears. His name is Boaz. As the kinsman redeemer Boaz marries Ruth, even though Ruth is a foreigner from Moab. Because of this strange marriage, the woman whose husband died, the woman named Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, the woman who said she wanted to change her name to Marah because her life was bitter, by the end of the little book of Ruth Naomi is celebrating and her friends are crying with joy, "Naomi has a son." And what would a long play be without a genealogy? So the book of Ruth concludes with just such a genealogy. "Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz (yes, that Boaz, who was the kinsman redeemer for Ruth), Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of...wait for it...wait for it...remember, this is a long play...and Jesse the father of David.

I love the little genealogy that we find in Ruth. It is a long play. You start mentioning generations and pretty soon you are up into the hundreds of years. Eventually, in the kingdom of David, there will be a king named Ahaz and a prophet named Isaiah and a promise that the virgin will be with child and unto us a child will be born and the bread crumbs just keep getting dropped along the path, like the manna in the wilderness that guided Israel for forty years. Year upon year the long play continues. And then many, many years later, we are brought back to that genealogy that first appeared in Ruth. By now that genealogy contains more generations and more years and more longing and more waiting. Now that genealogy from Ruth is wedded to a larger genealogy, a longer genealogy. Now the genealogy doesn't end with David. In Matthew chapter one there is a genealogy that takes us from Abraham to David, fourteen generations, and then fourteen more generations from David to the that terrible time of exile in Babylon, and then fourteen more generations from the exile to the birth of...wait for it...wait for it...even though it carries...wait for it...don't give up...don't despair...don't lose hope...wait for it...wait for God's long play...and fourteen generations from the exile to the birth of Jesus, who is called the Christ.

Now what Isaiah said to Ahaz is no longer just for Ahaz. It is no longer just for one particular crisis at one particular time and in one particular place. God intended with the promise found in Isaiah to address every crisis in every time and every place. God intended to bring salvation to this world, to this whole world. God intended to send his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have life. Everlasting life. All this took

place to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah: “The virgin shall be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him *Immanuel*—which means ‘God is with us.’” (Matthew 1:23)

Because of that we rejoice in that ancient passage and claim it as our very own. “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.” And my daughter, the one and only Hogles Eberts, said I was the king of the long play. No, no, not even close. That title belongs to God. And when we get even a glimpse, just a tiny glimpse of God’s long and loving play, we break out in the Hallelujah Chorus. For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth...forever...and ever...and ever...that’s the best long play ever.

Not long after I ordered Sports Illustrated for our son Jake, and it got delivered to Salo Eberts, our daughter Hayley, aka Hogles Eberts ordered me a magazine. She loves learning, and she loves science, so she gave me a subscription to National Geographic. I was so pleased to receive my first issue I called her to tell her thanks. She asked if I looked at the subscription label. I had not looked at the subscription label. No wonder she wanted me to look at the label. It was addressed to Wouvie Eberts. I like that name Wouvie. Julie says I should use it when I’m a grandpa.

Then something happened last month that just blew me away. My National Geographic came in the mail. It was addressed as always to Wouvie Eberts. How do you think Wouvie felt when he looked at the cover and saw a picture of Jesus? And read an article about how so many archaeological discoveries are confirming stories from the Bible? And saw pictures of people today, who are still worshipping Jesus? There were pictures of Indonesians beings baptized in the Jordan River, Samaritans gathering at holy sites, and Ethiopians huddled together in prayer. The final picture was of a man on his knees, at the place where Jesus suffered. Many think that place was Mount Moriah. More than 2,000 years since Jesus lived and died, more than 2700 years since the prophet Isaiah told about a child being born unto us...people from all over the world gather and in countless languages they call him Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. They call him Savior. They call him Lord.

As we consider how God is the King of the Long Play, listen to this poem written about Jesus. It is titled, “One Solitary Life.”

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Two thousand years have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the course of life upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.¹

Indeed, God is the King of the long play. Just think of that when you hear these words, “For unto us a child is born.”

¹ *Adapted from a sermon by Dr James Allan Francis in “The Real Jesus and Other Sermons” © 1926 by the Judson Press of Philadelphia (pp 123-124 titled “Arise Sir Knight!”).*