

Sermon Draft

Text: Isaiah 9:1–4

Sermon: “Alien Invader”

Our text from Isaiah is the continuation of a thought begun already in chapter 7. King Ahaz is terror-stricken about the formation of the Syro-Ephraimite alliance and is planning ways to overcome it. Isaiah condemns Ahaz’s attempts at self-sufficiency, political maneuvering, and idolatry rather than depending on God for security and protection. It is precisely this lack of faith in Yahweh that has the people plunged into thick darkness.

The class was Russian History and the university professor stood up in front of his class on the first day of the new semester and began to teach. He started the class with something that wasn’t unique to Russia at all but universally true. The professor said, “Students, whenever you’re studying history, there are ten universal truths you have to remember. We’ll call them ‘The Ten Big Ones,’ because that’s what my high school history teacher called them many years ago. So let’s get started. Number one is this: Geography Matters. Russia is, geographically speaking, the largest country in the world, and it spans eleven time zones. Any attempt to understand Russian history must account for its geographic realities.” And thus, the class on Russian history began.

The university professor was right. It is a universal truth that geography matters, and you don't have to look at the massive country of Russia to see it play out. You can look at the much smaller country of Israel and observe the same thing. Geographically, Israel is roughly 780 times smaller than Russia, but its geography is no less important.

When Isaiah speaks a prophetic word of liberty and hope in Isaiah chapter 9, it's a prophetic word that's shaped by geography. Specifically, Isaiah speaks of the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. He says, ***“But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations”*** (v 1).

But what land, exactly, are we talking about?

We're talking about a portion of the Promised Land, the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The story of how the Israelites came to possess this Promised Land is told in the Book of Joshua. After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he guided them to the borders of the Promised Land by Moses' hand.

After Moses died, Joshua was appointed the leader of Israel and led the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land and conquered it. The nitty-gritty, action-packed details of the conquest are found in Joshua chapters 1–12. But in Joshua chapter 13, the book’s rapid-paced storytelling gives way to the twelve tribes of Israel being allotted its portion of the land. Zebulun is one of those tribes, as is Naphtali, and they were allotted neighboring lands in the northern part of Israel. Think of Zebulun and Naphtali like Minnesota and Wisconsin. They’re both in the north and they share a border.

Zebulun and Naphtali are beautiful and fertile areas, but their location in the northern part of Israel makes them vulnerable to alien invaders. I’m not talking about extraterrestrials in flying saucers from outer space. But outsiders, aliens, just the same. I’m talking about foreign invaders. Conquering armies and military incursions. When foreign countries invade the land of Israel, they almost always come from the north because that’s the easiest way to get into Israel. The Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River which flows south from it form a natural barrier along Israel’s eastern edge.

The Mediterranean Sea forms a natural barrier to the west. Thus, alien invaders who are looking to go south to Jerusalem or even to Egypt are funneled first through the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. You see? Geography matters! Thanks to the geography of Israel, the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali are perpetually on the front lines of war and bloodshed.

In fact, at the time of Isaiah's prophecy, alien invaders known as the Assyrians are in the process of conquering Zebulun and Naphtali. Within a few years, the entire Northern Kingdom of Israel will be completely overthrown and the remaining Southern Kingdom of Judah will be brought to its knees before God's miraculous intervention.

Zebulun and Naphtali then are rightly identified by Isaiah as a land upon which the Lord brought contempt. They were a constantly conquered people. They were a burdened, beaten, and battered bunch. They were a land of darkness and shadow. They were in such a bad spot that just a few verses earlier Isaiah called them a land with "*no dawn*" that suffers "*the gloom of anguish*" (8:20, 22).

And remember, God had brought these alien invaders upon the land only because Israel had abandoned him, fallen into idolatry and all kinds of sin. So, Zebulun and Naphtali were a land of contempt filled with people who sit and walk and dwell in the darkness of deeds deemed damning by God.

It is to these hopeless people that Isaiah speaks a word of hope. Isaiah speaks of a stunning reversal of fortunes. God intends to make this *“land of contempt”* glorious. But how? How will this land go from contemptuous to glorious? The change has to come from entirely outside them. Alien. God will bring upon them another alien invader.

Except this time, it isn't a nation that will infiltrate the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. This time it will be just one man. And he doesn't come to them from out of the north like all the other alien invaders. This man comes from heaven itself. This man is God's eternal Son, Jesus Christ.

This is a different kind of alien invasion. Jesus takes no hostages, he plunders no grain, he exacts no taxes, and he sheds no blood except his own. Instead, Jesus teaches, and he preaches, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

It is this man and the good news on his lips who is a great light upon this land of darkness, because the Lord isn't interested in holding this land in contempt. He isn't looking to extract from Zebulun and Naphtali their greatest resources. He's looking to redeem their greatest resource, namely, the people themselves.

The more Jesus preaches, the more Jesus teaches, the more Jesus serves, the brighter the light shines. The evangelist Matthew says, ***“So [Jesus’] fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them”*** (Matthew 4:24).

People are flowing into Zebulun and Naphtali, not to conquer them but to be rescued by one in the midst of them.

As the light of Jesus Christ increases, the true source of darkness is exposed. The greatest threat to the people of Zebulun and Naphtali was never alien invaders from the north. The greatest threat to the people of Zebulun and Naphtali isn't alien to them at all. The greatest threat to the people of Zebulun and Naphtali is their own sin, the specter of death, and the schemes of the devil.

These are the things that held Zebulun and Naphtali in perpetual darkness. These were the real forces of oppression in their lives. And these are the oppressors from whom Jesus will rescue them.

Jesus, like any alien invader, makes a claim upon this people. He's claiming to be their Lord, and he's directing them to acknowledge his Father as King. But they will not be won over by oppression, because his is a kingdom of freedom. They will not be won over by threats, because his is a kingdom of grace. They will not be won over by extortion, because his is a kingdom of gifts. They will not be won over by fear, because his is a kingdom of love.

And it is God's love that will break the yoke of their burden. It is God's love that will break the rod of their oppressor. It is God's love that will drive Jesus south out of Zebulun and Naphtali to the city of Jerusalem in order to die on the cross. And when Jesus dies on the cross, Zebulun and Naphtali will experience darkness and gloom once more, as darkness covers the whole land when Jesus dies for them.

But the darkness doesn't linger. It dissipates. And in three days' time, it will give way forever to the resurrected Son of God.

So now the light that first shone in Galilee among the people of Zebulun and Naphtali is invading the world.

You and I don't share the geographical particulars with Zebulun and Naphtali. If we're living in North America, we're unlikely to be on the front lines of any alien invader. But the darkness that engulfed Zebulun and Naphtali doesn't care about geography, because it isn't an alien darkness. Our darkness is a local, homegrown darkness. Our darkness is our own sinful flesh.

For that darkness, Isaiah tells us all to look to Zebulun and Naphtali for hope, because there a great light has shone. This light is Jesus Christ and his ministry, and it is a ministry for all people of all times and all geographical places. This light is for you. It invades your life. The salvation first seen in Galilee is now coming for you. Indeed, it's already here. Jesus Christ is here, for you. He expels darkness. He forgives your sins, he casts out the devil, and he promises to raise the dead, all with the effect of increased joy.

Jesus Christ is the alien invasion we all need. It's a glorious invasion of grace. Totally alien. Totally from outside. In the person of Jesus, God's salvation comes from outside of us. To him be praise now and forever. Amen