**Morning service sermon – Advent 17 Dec 2017**

Good morning everyone! Who’s excited for Christmas? We’ve been waiting for nearly three weeks now, but we won’t have to wait much longer! That’s because, in the grand scheme of things, one month for Advent really isn’t that long. And then once Christmas has come and gone, it’ll come back round before we know it. When it comes to waiting for Jesus, we have it easy. It was much, much longer for those who came before us to wait - Abraham, David, Isaiah, Daniel who we read about in the Old Testament of the Bible. Advent, our topic for today and the season we’re in as we head towards Christmas, means the arrival of something or someONE of note. During advent, we look forward to celebrating the arrival of Jesus in Bethlehem - THE most notable person ever to be born. But for the prophets in the Old Testament, looking forward to the coming Messiah took more than a few months. It took centuries. And that is what I’m going to talk about this morning.

Today, as we look forward to Jesus’ birth in a stable 2000 years ago, I want to look at the prophesies of those people who were alive even longer ago than that, and what they wrote prophesying about Jesus’ coming. There are over 300 prophesies in the Old Testament which tell about the promised messiah, who we now know to be Jesus. I’m not going to talk about them all today, and I’m not even going to go into very much detail on any of them. In fact, if you came here this morning hoping to hear a really clear, really specific message, then I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed. Instead, what I want to do is give you a glimpse of some of these prophesies, and get you interested and excited about them and wanting to know more about them so you’ll go and read them for yourself. That’s my plan for this morning.

But what IS a prophesy, I hear you ask? Who were these prophets? What does ‘messiah’ mean? Well, firstly the Old Testament was written far, far before Jesus - from between 8,000 to 400 years before he was born - and all of it is about God’s chosen people Israel. Now throughout Israel’s history, often when they had turned away from God and weren’t listening to him, God would raise up prophets from among the people. These prophets were God’s chosen servants, who did listen to him, and to them God told all sorts of things concerning Israel and other nations - and these things God would tell them are called ‘prophesies’ because they predicted things which hadn’t yet happened. And finally, a lot of these prophecies were concerning the promised messiah, which means the saviour or deliverer, who God said he would send to rescue his people Israel from their foes and who would be their king. We now know that Jesus was and is this promised saviour, the Messiah, and it’s the prophesies talking about him that I’m looking at today.

So, when I think about these prophesies, I see them doing three main “jobs”, if you will.

- For those looking towards Jesus in the Old Testament, they are a promise and a hope of salvation in the coming Messiah.

- At the time of Jesus, the prophecies validated and certified him as the Messiah.

- And for us looking back at Jesus life, they give us a deeper knowledge and understanding of him as our Messiah.

I’m going to come back to this quite a bit, so I’ll repeat that for you:

- For those looking towards Jesus, they are a promise and a hope of salvation through him.

- For those at the time of Jesus, the prophecies validated him.

- And for us looking back at Jesus’ life, they give us a deeper knowledge and understanding of him.

So then, I’m going to go over these three points and give some examples of prophesies which fit. First, for those looking towards Jesus, they are a promise and a hope of salvation in him. We know that sending Jesus to die for us and to be our saviour was ALWAYS God’s plan, from the very beginning of time. And so, to those people who really listened and believed in God when the rest of Israel was going to pot back in parts of the Old Testament, God let them in on the plan. In Jeremiah chapter 25, God says to Jeremiah the prophet “The days are coming when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.” God says to Micah in chapter 5 of the prophet’s book that the coming messiah “will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.”

These prophets lived in a time of great struggle and when Israel’s enemies all around them were pursuing them because they had turned away from God, and so God showed them what was to come, what he was planning. He told of how the Messiah was to be a wise and righteous King, completely juxtaposed to most of Israel’s kings. He told of how the sister kingdoms of Judah and Israel would like in peace and safety. He told of how the Messiah would be a shepherd to his people. In the reading from the book of Isiah that’s read at the traditional Nine Lessons and Carols Service, chapter nine verses six and seven, God says of the Messiah that he will be called “Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Pease”, and tells of how his kingdom will have no end. He tells Isiah that the Messiah will be God himself, that he will rule over his people in a reign of peace that lasts forever! This, says God, is my plan. He’s saying to the prophets that he hasn’t abandoned them, but that someone is coming which will wipe away all the pain and devastation that has come because of Israel’s disobedience to God.

And what about that disobedience? God is just, as the prophets know, and to atone for Israel’s sin, for God to forgive their wrongs and for them to be his people again, there must be a sacrifice. That’s how God’s Holy Law works. Well, again in Isiah (chapter 53 this time), God tells of how the Messiah will be this sacrifice. Isiah writes “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities” (and a little further on) “For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Here, God tells Isiah of how Jesus, as the Messiah, will suffer for the sake of his people, and how through his suffering he will bear their sins, their wrongs, and they will be justified and forgiven.

And the reason for telling the prophets these things? Because God loves them, and loves his people. He wants them to know that a time is coming when everything will be ok, that He has it all in hand. And more importantly, it was so the prophets could be saved. We know that we are saved through our faith in Jesus. We trust in his death on the cross in our place, because of our sins, and we believe that he was raised from the dead three days later, and we make a choice to follow him as our Lord and God. It is this faith in Jesus’ sacrifice for us that saves us. But, because the prophets came BEFORE Jesus sacrifice, they could only be saved through faith in him if they were told about him beforehand - THAT is one reason why these prophesies about Jesus are so important. It is through them that the Old Testament prophets were saved, because they trusted in God and in the coming of his Messiah, and they trusted that his sacrifice would wipe clean their sins. This is why I said the prophesies were the promise of salvation for the prophets - as it was through them that they were saved.

What about the second point - that for those at the time of Jesus the prophesies validated him as Messiah? This, I think, is the most phenomenal part of these prophesies, and there are just so many that fit into this ‘camp’. When Jesus was born, and later during his ministry, everyone was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, who they thought would save Israel from the oppression of the Romans. He was expected to be a great military leader and strike down their foes, but Jesus was nothing of the sort. However, for those who read the Old Testament closely, there were many signs that Jesus was the promised Christ.

Just look at the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is known as the Gospel for the Jews, and the author took pains to show how the Old Testament pointed to Jesus. In the Matthian birth narrative, Isiah is quoted - “but you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel” - showing that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem, where Jesus is said to have been born. Again, in chapter four Isiah is quoted saying “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - the people living in darkness have seen a great light” - because when Jesus began his ministry he went to live in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali, thus fulfilling this prophesy. Over and over again, in the other gospels as well as in Matthew, Old Testament prophesies about the Messiah are quoted to show how Jesus fulfils them, to validate him as the Messiah. Jesus even quotes Old Testament prophesies about himself - in Luke, at the synagogue in Galilee in chapter 4, Jesus reads from Isiah chapter 61 saying “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the lord’s favour.” Then Jesus sits down, and says that the prophesy was fulfilled in their hearing - in him!

And these prophesies that we see fulfilled in Jesus can be just as revealing and life-changing to us today. When I was younger and still lived with my parents, I didn’t really have a faith of my own. I went to church but I questioned everything I saw there. So one day, my mum suggested inviting our pastor round to have a chat with me. I didn’t really know him, but Chris is a really, really nice guy and a retired secondary school teacher so he knew how to talk to teenagers like me. We talked, and Chris argued apologetics with me - reasoned arguments for the case of faith in Jesus. One thing that really stuck with me, and helped me on my faith journey, was when he told me some of these Old Testament prophesies about Jesus. I still remember being struck by Psalm 22, which talks about the Messiah’s suffering. Verses 16-17 read “Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feed. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing”. Jesus was surrounded by evil men - Roman soldiers - and beaten. His hands and his feet were pierced when he was nailed to the cross. When he was being cruxified, the soldiers divvied up his clothes among themselves and cast lots for them. This Psalm speaks of Jesus’ death in such accurate terms that I was completely taken aback by it. And the fulfilment of this prophesy couldn’t have been planned or orchestrated by any followers of Jesus, because it all focusses on the Romans who mostly didn’t care about the Jewish prophecies! The only way I could see this Psalm being as accurate as it was, was if God’s hand was in it. And this is the sort of prophesy that I’m talking about when I say they validate Jesus as the Messiah, as the promised saviour, because it is so amazingly, uncannily accurate, that it is very hard to explain away how well Jesus’ story fits. These prophesies helped turn Jews in Jesus time into believers, and they can help us too when we’re telling our friends and family about him.

There’s one last point I want to make, then - that for us now, who already put our faith in Jesus, these prophesies can still be so useful because they tell us things about Him which we can’t find anywhere else. They can deepen our understanding of him, and in turn deepen our faith in him and our relationship with him.

Let me give you an example. In Isiah 11, the Messiah is called the ‘Root of Jesse’. Jesse was King David’s father. Now Isiah and other prophets tell that the Messiah, Jesus, would be a descendant of David, the fulfilment of which is spoken of in Matthew. However, the ‘Root of Jesse’ means something subtly different. To be the ‘Root’, rather than the ‘Branch’, it must be because it is from the Messiah that Jesse comes, rather than the other way around. And this is because, while Jesus was humanly descended from the familial line of Jesse, as the Son of God, the Word, he was present before the beginning of Creation. The beginning of John says that “In the beginning was the Word… and through him all things were made” - that is, through Jesus, the word of God, all things (including Jesse) were made. So Jesus is both a descendent of Jesse AND Jesse’s source, Jesse’s origin, who came before him. This is pretty complex theology, but Isiah’s prophesy helps to explain it.

Another way the prophesies about Jesus help us understand him better is that they give a deeper meaning to things we already know. It’s well known that Jesus is often called the ‘Son of Man’ - it’s a title Jesus uses for himself dozens of times throughout the gospels. But what does it actually mean? To find out, we need to look to one of the Old Testament prophets, Daniel, as he prophesied about Jesus. When telling of a vision he had, Daniel writes in chapter 7 “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” So Jesus referring to himself as the Son of Man, a phrase which originally just meant ‘human being’, in fact sets him up as the figure Daniel saw in his vision. Calling Jesus the Son of Man is actually to say that he has authority and sovereign power given him by God, and that he has an everlasting kingdom that will never end and can never be destroyed. This is the kingdom Jesus talks about throughout the gospels, and here all the way back in the Old Testament is Daniel’s vision of God the Father establishing this Kingdom. Isn’t that cool? I think it’s cool.

There are more general things we can learn about Jesus from the Old Testament too, which aren’t from specific prophecies. Like, Jesus is often called the Passover Lamb - but what does that mean? What was the passover all about, and why was the Lamb important? And when he initiated the Lord’s Supper, what we often call communion, Jesus said that there was a ‘new covenant in my blood’. But to understand what that means, we need to know what the ‘old covenant’ was - why it didn’t work, and why and how Jesus replaced it with a new covenant.

I think we often take the prophesies about the Messiah from the Old Testament for granted, and never really think much about them. But we should - these are messages and glimpses of the future that God gave to his trusted servants hundreds of years before Jesus was born, all telling of his coming, of who he was and what he came to do. They were given to give hope, to point towards Jesus as our saviour, and to teach us about this coming Messiah who would save us from our sins, and establish a new kingdom which we are invited into and which will never cease.

So, I believe wherever you are on your faith journey and whatever you believe about Jesus, God has something to say to you through his prophesies about his Son. Are you struggling just to believe in Jesus? Do you wonder if God even exists? If that’s you, read about how Jesus birth, life and death were so accurately predicted by the prophets, because they were told it by the Spirit of Jesus - how he would be born in Bethlehem, flee to Egypt, live in Galilee. How he would wear a crown of thorns, have his side pierced, not have a bone broken. How he would suffer and die, but be raised to life again and sit on his father’s throne. Let the reflection of Jesus’ life in the Old Testament show you that he really is real, he really does love you and really did die for you.

Or maybe you know Jesus well, but life is seeming far too difficult right now. Maybe you need to be given hope for the future, just like the prophets were. If you look the the Old Testament, you can read about how Jesus came to bind up the brokenhearted, to open the prison of those who are bound, to bring good news. How he came to be our Kinsman-Redeemer, to be our scapegoat, be a light to those in darkness. Let the light of hope and life that shines out of the prophesies about the coming (and now come!) saviour be your light and your hope.

Or, maybe, you know everything I’ve said today and you’ve learned nothing new. Maybe you feel like you know all about the Old Testament prophesies and there’s nothing else to get from them. To you, I would say go and really look again at these glimpses of Jesus in the Old Testament. Look at how Jesus life is reflected in the lives of Joseph, Moses, Ruth and Esther. Find out what it really means that Jesus is the first fruits of the harvest, that he is a priest of the order of Melchizedek, that he is greater than his father David. There is so much depth in the Messianic prophesies, because they’re all so wrapped up in the rich history of God and his people Israel.

So, I hope I’ve piqued your interest in the prophesies about Jesus in the Old Testament, and maybe you’ve learned something you didn’t know before. If you’re excited about reading more of them, there’s a sheet in the hall which you can pick up when having your tea and coffee with some bible references you might like to look at. Above all, I hope you have a slightly deeper appreciation of just how broad and detailed and wonderful God’s plan is for the world through Jesus, and how generous he was to let a small group of dedicated followers, and now us thousands of years later, in on his plan. And I hope that this advent, you’ll look forward to this promised messiah even more than you usually do. Let’s pray…