



The One Who Will Be Born: Preaching Isaiah's Promises in a Harry Potter Culture

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The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches....Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies....and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.

—Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix¹

The preacher who dares to preach on the Isaiah passages that the Revised Common Lectionary assigns for the first, second, and fourth Sundays Advent this year (2:1–5; 11:1–10; 7:10–16)² is one who chooses the narrow, more difficult way. This is so for a variety of reasons. First, to preach on any future-oriented prophetic text is an uphill climb simply because our culture always understands “prophecy” as equal to “prediction.” As the readers of *Word & World* will no doubt know, the

¹J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic, 2003) 841.

²Note that for the third Sunday in Advent, the lectionary assigns Isa 35:1–10. This passage is not treated here, because scholars agree that this passage was not spoken by Isaiah of Jerusalem but by his anonymous successor, Isaiah of the Exile (Second Isaiah). For reasons of length and historical focus, this article could not accommodate an analysis of Isa 35.

The prophetic texts for Advent are not merely historical nor merely predictive. They should be read as vital messages to their original context, as promises fulfilled in Jesus, and as living words for hearers today.

biblical prophets were far more than mere predictors.³ But in spite of generations of instruction from pulpits and in fellowship halls, the culture still stubbornly clings to the idea that prophecy is prediction and never more than prediction. By way of example, consider how “prophecy” is understood and how this understanding functions in the recently completed Harry Potter novels by J. K. Rowling. The plot of the seven-novel cycle is initiated when Sybill Trelawney (later the “divination” professor at Hogwarts) falls into a trance and utters the words that appear above. The words, which do not mention Harry Potter by name, are reported to Voldemort, who concludes that the baby Potter is the one “with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord.” Voldemort attempts to kill Harry, which sets the plot in motion. For the purposes of this essay, the point is, first, to note that prophecy is understood as merely prediction; and second, to imagine how Isaiah’s messages that we hear in Advent will sound in a Harry Potter culture.

Christian readers of the Gospel of Matthew may discern a parallel between Rowling’s story of a dark lord who responds to a prophecy by resolving to kill an infant and Matthew’s account of King Herod’s reaction to the wise men’s report that a child had been born who was “king of the Jews” (Matt 2:1–2). Indeed, within Rowling’s larger tale, Harry Potter does function as a Christ figure on several levels. This association between Jesus and Harry will only serve to reinforce the cultural misunderstanding of prophecy that many in the pews will hear the moment the preacher announces, “Today’s first lesson comes to us from the words of the prophet Isaiah....”

Before we get down to brass tacks, there is one more preliminary question to be asked and to be learned from: Are there common missteps that are taken when preaching on these texts? In our experience, the answer is yes. These two common missteps may be described as placing one’s foot either in the prophecy-as-prediction ditch on the right or in the prophecy-as-ancient-historical-accident ditch on the left. As indicated, stepping in these two ditches is a common occurrence for preachers, but a misstep from which preachers can learn.

On the one hand, when one’s foot lands in the prophecy-as-prediction ditch, a preacher proclaims these texts as if they were straight out of Harry Potter. That is, the preacher gives the congregation the impression that the prophet’s messages were not born in a specific social context or that the prophet did not address specific realities in that social context. The focus is solely on how the prophetic mes-

³It should be noted, however, that the notion that the prophets were “forthtellers” and not “foretellers” has been overdone. To put this another way, as part of their role as messengers from God, the prophets did at times foretell. As J. J. M. Roberts writes, “prediction is an important element in biblical prophecy, and even those apparently ‘timeless ethical elements’ are normally framed within or given urgency by threatening predictions or encouraging promises based on what God is about to do. Scholarship has come to recognize that once again in our day, and such pronouncements of the older scholarship as, ‘Prophets are forthtellers, not foretellers,’ have gone out of fashion” (“A Christian Perspective on Prophetic Prediction,” in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002] 406). The point here is that even when prophetic messages took the form of what we might call prediction, they were not only about the future. These predictions included an aspect of what we might call a pastoral concern for the present. That is, the predictions were about giving hope for the present in the midst of despair, or about prodding repentance and change in the present in the midst of sin.

sage applies to Jesus (a worthy goal, by the way, but not so at the expense of obscuring the prophet's context and world). The impression is given, often inadvertently, that the prophet himself was in fact not even aware of his own context. That is—like Rowling's Professor Trelawney, who speaks her predictions in a trance and who awakes from these trances completely unaware that time has passed or that she has spoken at all—the prophet's message is treated as a disembodied cartoon speech bubble that only points to Jesus. From this misstep we learn the danger of uprooting Isaiah's messages from Isaiah's context and treating them as no more than road signs on the way to Jesus. A better alternative would be to approach Isaiah's prophetic oracles as words that are first spoken to the prophet's own time, continue to speak to our time, and—in the broad canonical context that includes the New Testament—as words that help to proclaim the wonder that God accomplished in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, when a preacher's foot lands in the prophecy-as-ancient-historical-accident ditch, the preacher risks leaving the congregation with the impression that the prophet's messages may have been relevant to his own time, but have little connection with our own, and probably no connection with Jesus. In this misstep, the focus is solely on Isaiah's eighth-century world (a worthy goal, by the way, but not so if one obscures the connection both with Jesus and with us). We don't have a parallel literary illustration (à la Harry Potter, above) to exemplify this approach. And indeed, this approach, which usually devolves into sermons that sound more like academic lectures than sermons on God's living word, is often so dry and tedious that it does not deserve literary illustration. From this misstep we learn the danger of leaving Isaiah's messages stranded in ancient Jerusalem, divorced from the advent of the savior Jesus and divorced from us and our world. Again, a better alternative would be to approach Isaiah's ancient oracles as words that continue to speak to our time and, in the canonical context of the New Testament, as words that help to proclaim the reconciliation of all that God has made in Jesus Christ.

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It should be noted at this point that in a quick reading of the New Testament, it might seem not only to support but even to practice a prophecy-as-prediction reading of the Old Testament. One word we read over and over again in the New Testament is “fulfill.” A simplistic or lazy reading might stop right there. Jesus saves, and for his next trick he fulfills. But crucial to the point is that it is not just prophetic texts that are said to be fulfilled in Jesus. Two examples from the Gospel of Matthew: First, in Matt 2:15, Hos 11:1 is quoted as fulfilled when Jesus is taken by Joseph and Mary down to Egypt to escape Herod. From Egypt, God's Son will

come when he is called. But in Hosea, God's "son" is clearly the whole nation of Israel. At this particular point Hosea is in no way dealing with messianic expectations—in fact, the passage is not even a prediction of any kind! And it strikes us as inconceivable that Matthew was ignorant of the context in which Hosea prophesied, and the very specific references of Hos 11:1. Matthew does not seem to be reading Hosea as prophecy in the predictive sense; rather, he is appropriating an Old Testament image that suits the gospel story. Second, Matt 13:35 quotes Ps 78:2 about speaking in parables and proclaiming hidden things. Psalm 78 is a historical psalm, in which the author/reader is reciting the details of Israel's salvation history. What we find there is not prophetic prediction of a parable-sliding messiah to come. Here again Matthew has appropriated an Old Testament text, in this case the pattern of God's saving work, and applied it to the teaching and work of Jesus. What this suggests is that the New Testament authors knew fully and well that the scriptural passages that they were applying to Jesus had an original context and meaning, and they knew that the secondary interpretation and meaning that they were assigning to those texts was a secondary application, a secondary fulfillment of those words. To put it more bluntly, the New Testament writers knew that when Isaiah spoke (in Isa 7) of a young woman who would conceive and bear a son who would be called Immanuel, he was referring to a woman of the eighth century B.C.E. who was pregnant and who delivered a child in the eighth century B.C.E. Matthew knew this fully when he also applied that promise to Jesus (Matt 1:18–23). In this way, the New Testament authors model a sophisticated and intentional usage of Old Testament Scripture that appropriates those words, that Word, for their time.

Back to the main question. How does one preach the texts of Isaiah's promises in a Harry Potter world? The proposal offered here is that a preacher should approach these texts with a well-rounded sense that the texts had an original Old Testament context, that they were reinterpreted and played a key role in a New Testament context, and that they remain Scripture for us in our present context. Another way to put this is to say that these texts should be preached on three levels: first, as vital messages to their original context (that is to say, that whatever "prediction" may have been a part of the passage had the pastoral concern of affecting the faith of the people who originally heard the message); second, as being "fulfilled" in Jesus, because they were reinterpreted in order to be part of the vital message of the gospel of Christ that was proclaimed in the first century; third, as having a vital message for us still today as part of the church's Scripture. They are not merely archaeological evidence of what God did or said in the past, but are God's ongoing word to us in this age. By taking such a threefold, well-rounded approach to these passages, we believe that the preacher will avoid flattening them and will indeed help their witness to be heard still today.

*Advent 1: Isaiah 2:1–5*⁴

The prophet Isaiah ministered in and around the city of Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, ca. 738–690 B.C.E. During this life, Judah’s northern neighbor Israel first attacked Judah (ca. 735–732) and was later conquered and destroyed by Assyria (ca. 729–722). Isaiah 2:1–5 begins by promising a future action of God—that God will establish “the mountain of the Lord’s house [Zion in Jerusalem]” “as the highest of the mountains” so that “all the nations shall stream to it” and so that “out of Zion shall go forth instruction [Heb. *torah*, תורה].” At the end of the present reading Isaiah addresses the “house of Jacob” directly, calling it to walk in the Lord’s light. In Isaiah, the phrase “house of Jacob” generally refers to the northern kingdom of Israel (see also v. 3, “the house of the God of Jacob”), meaning that Isaiah’s message can be understood as directed to Judah’s neighbors to the north. It is impossible to date this passage precisely to a particular point in Isaiah’s life with full certainty, but it is likely that Isaiah spoke the oracle either shortly before or (more likely) shortly after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722. Isaiah invited the remnant of the north to rejoin Jerusalem (cf. 7:17; 10:20–23) and renew its loyalty to the Davidic monarchy (which God was in turn soon going to renew, see below).

Notice how the prophetic message is at heart a set of promises. The prophet promises that God will renew Jerusalem, that the nations that have been coming to destroy Samaria and Jerusalem will soon come to Jerusalem to learn God’s ways and have disputes judged, and that God will send out *torah* to the ends of the earth. The first and most radical thing to recognize about these promises is that they are a breathtaking restatement of God’s promises both to Abraham and David (cf. Gen 12:1–3; 2 Sam 7:8–17). In a time of national despair—both for Israel, which was about to suffer or had just suffered destruction, or for Judah, which was about to suffer greatly, although it would survive—these promises are nothing less than a radical restatement of the basic promises that God would bless the people to be a blessing (make peace reign on earth and send out *torah* to the nations) and that God would protect the people of Israel for the sake of this mission.

If one were looking for a prophetic text that seemed addressed only to a particular audience at a particular time, this might seem a good candidate. But this oracle is not unique to Isaiah. In fact it occurs, almost word for word, in the book of Micah as well. Two key pieces are different in Mic 4:1–3; first, and not surprisingly, the introduction attributing the word to Isaiah is not present, and second, the oracle ends differently. Micah does not call the house of Jacob to repentance, but continues the description of peace, painting a restful and rest-filled picture of

⁴The pericope may conflate parts of two separate prophetic oracles (2:1–4 and 2:5–22). For the sake of the current analysis, because the lectionary assigns vv. 1–5, we will treat these verses as a coherent unit. We also believe that these verses comprise an authentic Isaianic message. Some scholars have questioned the oracle’s authenticity, but given that the passage contains themes, theology, and vocabulary consistent with much else in Isa 1–39, we believe that the passage is authentic. It may not have originated with Isaiah, as the parallel in Mic 4:1–3 indicates, but it is treated here as authentic at least in the sense that it was spoken by the prophet.

the onetime warriors reclining at ease beneath their vines and fig trees. That Micah and Isaiah employ the same oracle in different ways is liberating; this mixed context can free us as well to read it not just as an oracle set in and wedded to a particular moment in the past, but as a word spoken encouragingly to our own time.

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While Isa 2:1–5 is not quoted or alluded to directly in the New Testament, there are certainly strong thematic connections that can be made. Isaiah describes a day when God’s reign will be sought by all, a time for the ending of the implements of war, a unified walking in the ways and paths that God shows us, and a time when God’s word will go out from Jerusalem. According to the New Testament witness, all of this has happened and is happening in Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the only way to true life. The promise that the mountain of the house of the Lord will be “the highest” is not, of course, a literal promise that Zion will outstrip Mount Everest in height—or even that it would become the highest physical mountain in Palestine. Rather, it is a mythological image of the preeminence of what God has done for all of the world through Jerusalem and those who live there. As such, Acts 1:8 offers a fitting commentary on the promise of Isaiah: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

It is perhaps too obvious to need saying, but in the present day as we read this text from Isaiah we cannot help but see that the promise of peace is not yet fulfilled. As a word spoken into the darkness of our own world—to dying churches and diminishing denominations—the message continues to promise that God is not done with us yet, that God still sends out the word so that we and others may walk in his ways and in his light. We continue to live in the midst of wars and rumors of wars. The day has not yet come when all the world’s nations and people flow as one to the foot of God’s throne. At least not fully. But the promise has been made. It is precisely for such a day as ours that Isaiah spoke. His image has power—it is hope-filled and hope-filling. Instruction and just judgment have come forth from Jerusalem. As Christians we read this text with an eye not so much to the specific day as to the specific source of this instruction, judgment, and peace. As we join in the expectation of that day and hour about which no one knows and prepare to mark the day of Jesus’ birth—which is, to borrow an expression, a foretaste of the day that is to come—we can take hope from the vision that Isaiah shares of a world at peace, enthralled to the power of God and at rest at the feet of God’s Son. The preacher can point to this vision and join Isaiah in the summons to come and walk in the light of the Lord.

Advent 2: Isaiah 11:1–10

As noted above, Isaiah’s message that God was going to renew the promises upon which Israel was founded included the promise that God was going to renew Jerusalem. Isaiah also foresaw that, as part of God’s renewing actions, God was going to renew the Davidic monarchy. As J. J. M. Roberts has written: “Micah’s promise of a new ruler from Bethlehem and Isaiah’s promise of a shoot from David both suggest a new David is needed....It would seem that both prophets expected a new embodiment of the Davidic ideal....It also seems certain that Isaiah expected this new David in the near future.”⁵ Isaiah 11:1–10 is one of the key places where Isaiah promises the renewal of the monarchy. He does so via a description of the ideal Israelite (Davidic) king. Within the body of First Isaiah (Isa 1–39) this description of the king is “predictive” in the sense that it announces what God would be in the future, but even more so it is “pastoral” in the sense that it promises hope to a people in despair.

*“the image of the ‘shoot from the stump’ is an image of renewal—
it signals a new spring season of God’s promises”*

The ideal king is described in a series of powerful phrases. Here we will highlight just two. First, he will be a shoot from the stump of Jesse. In other words, he will be a member of the royal family, a true Davidic king from the Davidic line. The image of the “shoot from the stump,” moreover, is an image of renewal—it signals a new spring season of God’s promises, the regrowth of that which has appeared chopped down or dead. (The New Testament reinterprets this promise in light of Christ’s resurrection, announcing that life has come from death in a new way; cf. 1 Cor 15:3–4.) Second, this king will have the Spirit of the Lord upon him. Other characteristics of the king—his righteousness, equity, justice, and wise judgment—derive from this first trait, that “the Spirit of the Lord” rests upon him. This phrase is an important element of true leadership in the Old Testament. It is used of judges (see Othniel, Judg 3:10; Gideon, Judg 6:34; Samson, Judg 14:6), of prophets (see Ezekiel, Ezek 11:5; Jahaziel, 2 Chr 20:14), and of course of king David himself (1 Sam 16:13). So that the promised king is described in this fashion is both fitting to the nation’s needs and formative of the people’s expectations.

In addition to these by now familiar (we read them every Advent!) characteristics of the ideal king found here, Isaiah uses a term that may easily be overlooked but that can add insight both into Isaiah’s word for his own time and in an understanding of the move to the New Testament. In Isa 11:10 the root of Jesse, the promised king, is said to “stand as a signal to the peoples.” The key word here is “signal” (סִימָן in Hebrew). Occurring just twenty-one times in the Old Testament, סִימָן is translated in the NRSV alternately as “signal,” “banner,” “ensign,” “standard,”

⁵J. J. M. Roberts, “The Old Testament’s Contribution to Messianic Expectations,” in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 382–383.

and even as “pole,” “sail,” or “warning.” The function of the word seems to support such a variety of translations. The “signal” serves as a banner of war (Jer 51:12, 27), a rallying point in battle (Ps 60:4), a message of warning (Num 26:10), or a sign of celebration (Jer 50:2). Of the twenty-one occurrences, ten of them are in Isaiah. And in the book of Isaiah the usage is far less varied. The signal in Isaiah is tied primarily to the promise of impending action, and even more specifically to the promise of restoration (cf. 11:12; 49:22; 62:10). The people will be called from isolation and exile to return and be restored by the sign of the signal. In Isa 11 the signal is not a banner or emblem but the person of the promised king around whom the nation will rally and be reformed. In light of the context of Isaiah of Jerusalem, the nature and function of the signal comes clear. Isaiah foretold the renewal of Jerusalem and of the Davidic monarchy, both as foundations of the restoration of the people and of God’s mission to and through that people. For a people “walking in darkness” (Isa 9:2), the renewed Davidic king would be the righteous religious center around which the nation was to be regathered.

What is in Isaiah a description of a God acting through a Davidic descendant is reinterpreted in the Gospels as God acting through another Davidic descendant—one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. The characteristics that Isaiah assigns to the shoot of Jesse are applied to Jesus—righteousness, wisdom, equity, wise judgment—and the key characteristic is his as well: the Spirit of the Lord descends upon Jesus when he is baptized by John. The New Testament does not take up this image of the signal explicitly, at least not in connection with Isa 11. But signal imagery is productive imagery for the work and person of Jesus. Jesus calls God’s people to repentance and return to right relationship with God (Matt 4:17). And in the Gospels it is the cross of Christ around which the Passover is redefined. Indeed, John 3:14 compares the lifting up of Jesus on the cross with Moses’ lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (Num 21:8–9). For many who hear or read John 3:14 the comparison of Jesus with a poisonous serpent is jarring. And this is perhaps as it should be. The cross ought never to be something with which we grow too comfortable, and the comparison may serve to heighten our discomfort with that signal event. But as we read Isa 11, and particularly v. 10, we can draw the connection between the messianic theology of the New Testament’s reading of the promised king, the little child who shall lead us, and the cross—because the “pole” of Num 21:8–9 is the **דָּל** of Isa 11:10. The word is the same, and so too the function. Jesus and the cross are that signal moment which God has worked for us; Christ and the cross are the rallying point, the banner around which Christian life, worship, and community are gathered. The signal moment of the cross is a day that has already happened—it is not promised but realized; it is a day that can serve to define our every day—full of promise to be realized; and it is a day that marks the call to a return of the kingdom of God—the promise and sign of the world to come.

In terms of a message directly for today, one brief word will suffice. The promises of the spirit of the Lord in Isa 11:2 are renewed and repeated at each bap-

tism. The promise of baptism is the promise that in the water and the word, the Spirit of God is poured out upon each of the baptized: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. Thus, through the mysterious means of grace that is baptism, Isaiah's ancient promise of a renewed promise is renewed in turn for each generation.

Advent 4: Isaiah 7:10–16

The first shall be last, it is said, and in terms of the historical order of the three messages from Isaiah of Jerusalem assigned for Advent, this is true. The passage from Isa 7 that is assigned for the last Sunday in Advent is the oldest of the three, dating from early in Isaiah's ministry when the northern kingdom Israel joined hands with the nation Syria (here called Aram) to attack the southern kingdom Judah (cf. Isa 7:1–9; 2 Kings 15:29–16:20). This passage, similar to the passage from Isa 11 assigned for Advent 2, is a promise concerning the Davidic monarchy. But rather than being a promise about the renewal of the monarchy, this promise is about God keeping the promise to David and about the preservation and protection of the monarchy.

The Lord sent Isaiah with a message of hope and promise for King Ahaz, who was preparing to become a vassal of Assyria in exchange for Assyria's protection against the invaders. But Isaiah's promise that the city and king would be protected by the Lord proved not to be welcome news for the king, precisely because his preference was to trust in human alliances rather than promises from God (cf. Isa 30:1–5; 28:14–22).⁶ The pericope for Advent 4 picks up in the middle of this story, at the point when Isaiah offers King Ahaz the choice of asking for any sign as surety that the promise is reliable. The king, robing himself brazenly in the sheep's clothing of a false piety, pretends himself too holy to ask God for a sign. Isaiah promises him a sign anyway: "the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel....before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted" (7:14–16).

In terms of his own era, the meaning of Isaiah's promised sign is rather clear. Isaiah's basic promise to the king was that both city and king would be protected (see v. 7: "[The invasion plot] shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass"). The name of the child is confirmation of that promise: The child will be called אֱלֹהֵינוּ, "God with us," reaffirming one of the foundational promises of Davidic theology, namely, that God is present in, with, and for the city of Jerusalem to protect the city. As Ps 46 has it, "God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns....The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge" (vv. 5, 7). The birth of the child is also a sign as to the length of time within which this promise will be kept: before the child is weaned and eating solid food the invading armies will have been defeated.

⁶See Rolf Jacobson, "Unwelcome Words from the Lord: Isaiah's Messages," *Word & World* 19/2 (1999) 125–132.

In Isaiah's own time, this promise was made *and kept*. We know that the invasion was not a success and that indeed the invading armies never brought siege to Jerusalem. The birth of the child is not reported, but we can presume that in Isaiah's time the child was born and named Immanuel. Isaiah was reformulating and restating God's promises for his own time. The announcement of the birth of Immanuel was part of that reformulation.

“How is it that the birth of a baby named ‘Jesus’ can fulfill the promise that a child will be born and named ‘Immanuel’?”

But what of the New Testament's reinterpretation of Isaiah's promise? Matthew 1:21–23 reports that Joseph was told that Mary would “bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” Many analyses of these verses focus on the term “virgin” and the nuances of the Hebrew word *עלִמָּה* and the Greek word *παρθένος*. But we wish to take our inquiry in a different direction by asking what we think is a rather obvious question (and one that we believe the author of Matthew would have expected us to ask). This question is: How is it that the birth of a baby named “Jesus” can fulfill the promise that a child will be born and named “Immanuel” (or “Emmanuel” in the Greek transliteration)? The baby was named Jesus, not Immanuel! On a literal level, it doesn't work.

But that is just the point. The writer of Matthew is not operating only on a strictly literal level. Like Isaiah in his own time, the anonymous author that we call Matthew was reinterpreting and reformulating God's promises for his own time. Writing after Easter and writing in light of the resurrection, Matthew confesses Jesus as God truly with us, as God incarnate in human flesh. The birth of Jesus—according to Matthew's witness—is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise that God is with us.

Isaiah's “prediction” remains a pastoral promise with a purpose and message for our day. The announcement that “God is with us” was not just a promise for Isaiah's own time or a prediction that was “used up” when Jesus was born. Rather, it is a countercultural promise for a culture that still needs that message, for a culture that still needs the message of Christmas. In fact, for a culture that needs to hear the message that “the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches....” ⊕

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