

2002 has been a difficult year for many people. The Catholic Church was embarrassed by a sex abuse scandal that damaged countless lives. Enron and WorldCom collapsed under the weight of greed and lies. Our country is braced for smallpox. We are threatening a first-strike attack against Iraq. The Holy Land resembles hell. Many families have suffered personal loss and tragedy. The economy continues to wobble. The drought diminished the harvest. And the Kansas City Royals lost 100 games. (You Chiefs fans, the Royals have a better chance of going to the Superbowl than the Chiefs do.) There was plenty of bad news this year.

If you were living in Israel in the 8th century BC, you had a bad year, year after year. The Assyrian army invaded Israel and enslaved people to steady their own wobbly economy. God's chosen people lived without homeland, without family and without integrity, but never without hope.

Our first reading tonight comes from that awful time and is chosen because it refers to a newborn baby: "A child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace." It sounds very Christmassy. But other lines of this prophecy don't sound Christmassy at all. They speak of the spoils of war; the yoke, the pole and the rod that burdened Israel; the boots that tramped in battle and cloaks rolled in blood. This prophecy addresses a people who have suffered bitter losses, oppression and untold emotional stress. They were having a very bad year.

What's more, they hadn't a clue how to have a good year. They had no leader who could step forward, unite the people, escape exile, flee in safety and rebuild the homeland. No one had any idea how it could be done. They were a freshman team playing the varsity; a third world country fighting a superpower; a clerk in a back office challenging company policy. There was nobody, nobody smart enough to get them home to Jerusalem.

So Isaiah spoke this prophecy to give them hope: "A child will be born to us, a son will be given to us. We don't know how to do it, but someone will be born who does." They believed they could not do it alone, God would save them, and it was going to take time.

I hope everybody here has a happy time planned with your family this Christmas, but many people are carrying a special hurt in a hard year. Christmas doesn't take all that hurt away, but it does announce this message of hope: God hears your needs. God will help. But it may take time. The answer may come with baby steps. If you are patient with God, if you know you cannot do it alone, and if you believe, Christ will save you.