



“The Reason for the Season”

a sermon by

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In the weeks to come of Advent we will be looking at prophecies about Christ as found in the book of Isaiah. As we move closer to the celebration of the birth of our Lord we will take up these scriptures as a source of spiritual nourishment as we see how the prophet anticipated the new thing that would happen for the people Israel, and as we anticipate and look for the new thing Christ does in our lives each day.

Before taking up our text I would like to share a word on the context of Isaiah to preface this passage and the weeks to come. Isaiah is speaking to the Israelites who find themselves in captivity among the Babylonians along the banks of the Euphrates river. There are volumes to say about the experience of captivity, but I will summarize by saying simply that this period of history was marked by one of great sadness for the people, as the threat of religious and cultural assimilation into other practices, and other gods was strong. In a nation defined by its religious identity, this was a very dangerous thing. The prophet found himself faced with the challenge of calling the people back to who they were as God's chosen, and not only to reconnect them with the notion that God is present and working among them despite their captivity, but to proclaim to them a word about the new thing that God was doing among them- in the promise of one to come who would forever free them from the pattern of sinfulness and falling away from the covenant to which they had become accustomed.

Isaiah prophesied that God would send a sacrifice that would shock the world with the power of God's love for Israel, that would call her back to her identity and reform her capacity to be a 'light unto the nations.' This is the longest text we will consider, but it is too rich to omit a sentence. These lines are beautiful in the tragedy and the love they convey and stand as some of the most powerful verses about the love of God in the Christian and Jewish traditions alike.

I will begin three verses earlier to set the stage. Hear the word of God: "See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. Just as there were many who were astonished at him- so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals- so he shall startle many nations; *kings shall shut their mouths because of him*; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate. Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; *he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him*. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for *our* transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, *and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the

Lord to crush him with pain...When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he *shall see light*; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and *was numbered with the transgressors*; he bore the sin of many, and made *intercession* for the transgressors.

This is probably not the most common Advent passage you have ever heard. It is not likely one to be recited in the children's pageant on Christmas eve, though it may gain a hearing in the Easter season. And yet this prophesy of equally devastating and wonderful proportions calls a halt to business as usual and prefaces our Advent season with the reminder of the death of a man that is imminent in our celebration of the life of the child. It foretells the subsequent rebirth of this man to new life, and with him the rebirth of each of us to new life through his suffering and death. It paints a paradox where the lowly are exalted, and the miraculous is achieved through the mundane. God is doing a new thing for Israel by sacrificing his most beloved, and the beloved is pouring himself out in faithfulness for God, redeeming all of humanity not only for their own sake but for the sake of a discipleship that can do no other before God than empty himself out fully in love, thus accomplishing God's purposes for Israel, for the Servant, for the world. All suffer the penalty of sin- deserving or not- and all are redeemed beyond imagination. This is the man whose life we celebrate. This is the child we prepare to receive, who we are challenged to welcome into our midst.

The holiday season is officially upon us. My husband and I have begun picking out the perfect affordable gift for our few family members and the weekends are beginning to fill with happy festivities. Decorations are cropping up around Spirit Square and that subtle curiosity about how all the work is going to get done between now and the New Year is just now starting to set up shop in my mind for the winter like the squirrels in my parents' attic. It is about this time every year that I begin to feel those first twinges of Christmas excitement, draw in deep breaths of slightly cooler air outside, and look for holiday tunes on the radio. And it is about this time every year that I start the preliminary search within myself for the real reason for our season, as they say. Baby Jesus, ok. Family and friends, ok, and, wow, is that a 20" Widescreen HD-Ready Flat-Panel LCD TV for only \$1099? Between the festivities and the commercialism and overtime to compensate for time off, there is so often so little room for soul searching that it all can become a bit convoluted at times and I am left wondering what is the real reason for this season? Is it the perfect holiday gift? The quest for the Christmas card that will achieve the proper balance of religiosity and hip styling? Can it be defined by my comfort level around those people with the red buckets ringing bells outside of the store? Is it the quality and quantity of decor around the house? The success of the office Christmas party? What is the reason for the season anyway?

Isaiah penned these words to a community that faced the threat of the assimilation of their religious identity into the overwhelming popularity and power of the gods around them, gods that promised satisfaction and fulfillment. That were surely more flashy than the God of Israel who, it would appear, had left the people for ruin in a secular culture, and really is the climate in which we hear these words today so different?

In this Advent season are we as Christians not challenged to resist the threat of assimilation into our secular Christmas culture? Isaiah sought desperately to call Israel back to who they were as a people of God, to re-center them upon his love for them and in this season don't we ourselves long to be called back, reconnected to what is real, to keep our perspective on what is the flesh and blood and guts of our identity as a people of God amidst all the excess, the fluff, the ploys for our dollars, our attention, our affection, our worship?

Do we not long to be reminded of the radical thing that God did, that God is doing still today by sending a baby to overthrow rulers, a man who would grow to shock kings into silence with his humility, a Savior acquainted with sorrow who would become the joy of the world? Who in brokenness and death would bring about completion and new life. Who in his darkest hour would become the light of the world. Who, in *our* darkest hour, would draw us into the presence of God forever. In a passage bound by paradox that is worthy of a hundred sermons, the prophet paints a picture of the real reason for the season in a composition rich with contrasts and framed by limitless grace. The child who was born unto us would become the man who would die for our sins. And though a grave was prepared he would never be laid to rest for he would rise again to new life and achieve glory for himself and salvation for us, that we might all become *his* children. upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

This table looks different than many you will stand before this holiday season. But in this simple table setting, in this humble offering is the bread of *life*, and the cup of *salvation*. It is void of festive trimmings but as Isaiah can attest it is not the beauty of the packaging but the quality of the sacrifice that interests God. For in the most ordinary packaging God transformed the world, transformed what eternity will look like for you and for me. Isaiah called Israel then back to their true reason for being as a people of God in the world, and now he calls us back to ours.