

“THE GREATEST GIFT THE WORLD NEVER WANTED”

Isaiah 52:7-10

Christmas Day (Series A)

December 25, 2016

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

On this Christmas morning we will be considering the Old Testament lesson from the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 52, verses 7 through 10. It is on page 523 of the pew Bible.

In this prophecy, Isaiah speaks of that joyful day when the Lord himself comes and reveals his salvation to the world. In some ways, it seems like a strange text for Christmas because it uses imagery of God’s strength, whereas as Christmas is the picture of God coming in humility. But I think it’s perfect, because it reminds us that God’s strength is hidden behind this humble image of an infant.

Please stand as you are able for the Old Testament lesson. From Isaiah 52, we begin reading at verse 7.

- 7 How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news,
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
- 8 The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice;
together they sing for joy;
for eye to eye they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
- 9 Break forth together into singing,
you waste places of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people;
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
- 10 The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

What is the greatest gift you never knew you wanted? You know what I’m talking about, right? It wasn’t on your Christmas list, and you didn’t even know you wanted it until you unwrapped it. And then it made perfect sense.

Maybe it happened this Christmas. But don’t feel bad if it didn’t, because it’s really hard to do. Maybe it hasn’t happened since childhood. It’s that gift where, when you open it, you immediately realize that it’s perfect for you, even though you never knew it. Maybe it’s something that you didn’t even know existed, like a Lego coffee mug, but someone found it and knew it would be perfect for you. Or maybe it’s something that you knew about, but it never

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occurred to you that you should buy it for yourself or ask someone for it. You didn’t even know you wanted it, but someone apparently knew you better than you know yourself, and they knew it would be perfect for you.

The last time I saw this happen was a couple months ago. Alicia and I were looking for a birthday gift for our ten-year-old niece. So we’re in the store, and I’m headed for the toy section, and Alicia stops me and says, “Do you think she would like a dry erase board?”

I was a bit confused by the suggestion, because, in my mind, ten-year-old equals toy. If it’s not a toy, it’s lame, and I want to be the cool uncle. But then Alicia explained all the reasons why our niece would like it. And it actually made sense. So we bought a dry erase board with different colored markers and some colorful magnets. And it was starting to make sense to me.

And then our niece opens it and exclaims, “A dry erase board! Thank you! I always wanted one of these!” And I’m thinking to myself, “It’s a dry erase board. No, you did not *always* want one of these. But I’m glad you like it.”

But most of all, I was impressed by my wife’s ability to identify the perfect gift. Our niece loved it. But I’m not sure she would have put it on her Christmas list.

And maybe you’ve had a similar experience where you didn’t really know you wanted something until you got it.

And there are other gifts too—gifts that are perfect for us, but they don’t have the same “wow factor.” They might be gifts that we need, but aren’t really excited about, like socks or jumper cables. And, yes, these are all things I have given to my wife for Christmas. Romantic; I know.

And then other times there are gifts that we just don’t want. We don’t ask for them. We don’t want them. And we don’t think we need them. You know—things like vegetables and exercise bikes and maybe even ... Jesus.

We need them, and someone knows we need them, but we sometimes have a hard time recognizing just how much we need them.

So when we consider Christmas, what sort of gift are we talking about. If anyone knows us better than we know ourselves, it is God. And he definitely knows better than we do, what we need. Just as a parent knows better than a three-year-old how beneficial those vegetables are, God also knows what is best for us, even if we fight it like a toddler fighting asparagus.

So, in God’s infinite wisdom, what sort of gift has he given to us? Has he given us what we want? Do we even want what God knows we need? And does his gift look like what we expected? In Jesus Christ, God gave us exactly what he promised through the prophets. But it might not look exactly how we expected it to look. And it might not even be what we wanted.

So let’s consider what Isaiah prophesied.

Isaiah ministered in the Southern Kingdom of Israel from about 740 to 680 bc. At this time there was tension in Middle Eastern international politics. Go figure. There was tension between the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom, also called *Judah*. The Southern Kingdom was where Isaiah ministered. And this was where the kings in the line of David ruled.

And the big foreign power at the time that threatened both kingdoms, was the nation of Assyria. They were really powerful and really mean. So during the middle of Isaiah’s ministry, Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And they did terrible things to them. Then,

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after they conquered the Northern Kingdom, they eventually moved on to the Southern Kingdom. Things did not look good.

But the Southern Kingdom had a good king. His name was *Hezekiah*. And King Hezekiah sought the LORD’s help. And God answered his prayer. While the Assyrian army was encamped outside Jerusalem, the angel of the LORD came down and destroyed the entire army. This took place about 701 BC. So the Southern Kingdom was saved ... for the time being (Is. 36-37).

But eventually, about a hundred years later, a different kingdom would rise to power. The name of this kingdom was Babylon.

Now, during the time of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, Babylon was not very powerful, at least, not compared to Assyria. So Israel was not really afraid of Babylon. But Isaiah prophesied to King Hezekiah that sometime after his death, all of his wealth and descendants after him would be carried off to Babylon (Is. 39:5-7). And, sure enough, a little over a hundred years later, this very thing happened. Sometime around 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered and destroyed Jerusalem. He took all the wealth from the palace and the temple, along with the rulers of Judah, and he carried them back to Babylon in captivity.

During the time of Isaiah and King Hezekiah, God had spared the Southern Kingdom. But judgment was eventually coming. And Isaiah knew it.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God warned the nation of the coming disaster. But he did more than that. He also promised to redeem them afterwards. So Isaiah also speaks words of comfort—lots of them. And this prophecy from chapter 52 is a prophecy of comfort.

Isaiah prophesies that good news is coming. He prophesies that God himself is coming to redeem his people. And when he comes, the watchmen will see him eye to eye (52:8). The watchmen’s eyes will look straight into the eyes of God.

And God will bare his holy arm. This is an image of strength—like a big football player flexing his muscles after he sacks the quarterback. God will bare his holy arm, and all the nations will see his salvation.

This is an image of God’s strength. But what does God’s strength really look like? When God bares his holy arm, it’s not the image of strength we might have expected. It’s not the gift the world was really looking for, and it might not even be the gift we wanted, because God’s strength often looks more like weakness. At Christmas his strength was veiled in the flesh of a weak and humble infant. God had bared his holy arm, and most of the world was unaware. In fact, the world rejected him. This is what John taught us in the Gospel lesson.

“The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” (John 1:9-11)

He was not the gift the world expected. He was not the gift the world thought it needed. He is the greatest gift the world never wanted. So the world rejected him. And when he came at Christmas, the world did not notice him.

But a few people did notice. One of them was a man named Simeon. We read about him in Luke 2. Simeon was waiting for the Messiah. He was like a watchman. And he was at the temple when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus there for the first time. At this time, Jesus was just forty

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days old. He didn’t look like anything but a weak and helpless baby. But Simeon recognized him. The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon the strength that was hidden from the world. And then Simeon spoke these words that sound a lot like Isaiah 52:

29 “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation
31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32).

Simeon was that watchman who saw the return of the Lord to Zion. He saw the Lord’s salvation—that holy arm he was baring before the nations. And what did that holy arm look like? It was a forty-day-old baby. Simeon was that watchman who looked eye to eye into the eyes of Yahweh, and they were a baby’s eyes.

This baby was he who existed from eternity past. By him all things were created (Col. 1:16). And now he had come among us as an infant. John taught us this as well in the gospel lesson.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:1-3, 14a)

That is who this little child is.

Now, when we hear the news that so-and-so among us is with child, we are filled with excitement and anticipation. Someone who has not existed, now exists. And there is so much potential. What will this child do with his or her life? What will this precious little human become? We wonder about the future. Then we marvel as we see growth. The child progresses from one level to the next.

But we never really wonder about the child’s past. That’s because, before the child was a newborn, it was just a smaller unborn human being. And before that, it was nothing. There is a definite upward trajectory. To go from nothing to a baby is a huge improvement.

But Jesus is different. He didn’t go from nothing to a baby. He went from *God* to a baby, but without giving up any of the “being God” thing. There is a definite *downward* trajectory here. Instead of simply thinking about what he would become, we have to think about what he gave up. As the Son of God he sat at the right hand of God the Father, ruling over all creation. But God came *down* to be with us. *Immanuel*.

The eternal God—the creator of the universe—hid himself in the image of weakness.

But you might be thinking, *Everyone starts out as a baby. So what? Jesus didn’t stay a baby forever. Maybe he grew up to look really strong.*

Okay. So what happened when Jesus grew up? Did he take on an image of strength? Did he start acting like a champion? What did he look like when he finally revealed himself as the true king? He didn’t look like a conquering hero. He looked like a condemned criminal, hanging bloody, naked, and defeated on a Roman cross. Is that the image of God’s strength?

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You know what? It is. It really is. That is the image of God defeating sin, death, and the devil for all time. That is his victory. That is his salvation. That is his holy arm which he bared before the world.

When God came at Christmas, and as he grew up in an average family, only to die a humiliating death, he was hiding his strength in weakness. It’s not what the world expected. And I don’t think it’s what we wanted. When we think about a conquering king, the image is very different. But God knew this was what we needed. So he gave us a humble infant, born in humility, who would grow up to die a humiliating death

It was good for God to hide his strength in weakness, because we can’t handle his untempered power. If God had come in power to destroy everything that is evil, you and I would have been included in that destruction.

So instead he hid his power in weakness. He was destroyed. He bore our sin. He bore the evil in our hearts. He bore it in his own body and suffered the wrath of God for us. And this is his power. The weakness of the cross is the power of salvation.

In Isaiah 53, just a few verses after our text for this morning, the prophet goes on to talk more about “The arm of the LORD.” He asks, “To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” (53:1) And he goes on to say, “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him” (53:2). “He was despised and rejected by men” (53:3). “He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53:4). “He was pierced for our transgressions ... and with his wounds we are healed” (53:5).

“The arm of the Lord” looks kind of weak. It is despised, rejected, and it appears to be destroyed.

Here Isaiah is describing what Jesus will suffer at the cross. It looks to the natural eye like weakness, but Isaiah identifies it as the mighty arm of the LORD. His weakness is our salvation, because he did all this for us.

Jesus does have his glorious moments too. His resurrection was quite glorious. And we expect that when he returns again, it will look very powerful. But first he had to hide his strength in weakness, because that is what sinners like you and me needed.

A God who comes in weakness is the gift the world never wanted. But it is exactly what we needed. So that is what God gave us.

“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14)

Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.