

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Christmas Eve  
What Isaiah Knew and We Have Forgotten  
Rev. John Crow

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

In America, we have an obsession with the new. Everything new is better than everything old. If you don't believe me, just visit your local grocery store and look at the packaging. Most items, though the same on the inside, have packages that are different from how they looked just a few years ago. Sometimes, companies will even advertise the fact that the packaging has changed, saying, "New look!", like that is supposed to make us want to buy it. Knowing that the marketing industry utilizes advanced psychology to make us want to buy, I have to assume that even though we laugh about it, it actually works.

We also tend to think that ideas and ways of doing things that are old are inferior. We even think that we are smarter than previous generations. Let's be honest; you probably think you are smarter and wiser than those who lived in biblical

times, yet a man who lived over 2,700 years ago understood something vital probably better than everyone in this room today. I'm speaking of Isaiah, and the fact that he truly understood what God was up to in sending His Son 700 years before it happened, more so than we do now, with 2,000 years of hindsight. Let's spend the rest of our time exploring the things Isaiah knew about the coming Messiah, and what Isaiah's prophetic understanding means for us today.

If I were to ask you why the Christ child came, the immediate answer for most people would be to die for our sins. One thing that the Old Testament makes clear is that the price of sin is death. The priests were continually slaughtering one animal or another as a sacrifice for the sins of the Israelites. Today we rely on Christ's perfect sacrifice as the price of our redemption. The first verse of tonight's reading in Titus chapter two says that Jesus has brought salvation to all. Isaiah 40:2 says our "iniquity is pardoned". What I think we don't really understand is just how amazing this is. If you are like me, having grown up in the Church, you probably heard this truth hundreds, if not thousands of times before you were even old enough to repeat it. We have all seen John 3:16 displayed everywhere from ball games to bumper stickers. And just like anything else with

us silly humans, psychology kicks in, turning the most amazing news ever into something to yawn at. Anything we've seen and heard *ad nauseum* simply fails to get us excited anymore. I'll admit, even as one who has dedicated his life to the good news of the grace of God offered through Christ's blood, I tend to get more excited over warm chocolate chip cookies than the truth of our salvation.

Isaiah clearly understood the magnitude of God's grace through the coming Messiah. I think this is true not only because it was a longing of all faithful Israelites in his day, but also because Isaiah was so close to God. Again, human psychology causes us to value something more when we don't have it than when we do. During our lives, God's grace has been freely offered to all. That's what we know. As an aside, the word "freely" also points to a reason why we undervalue God's grace: the capitalist mindset. Anything that is free can't be of much value. We have been trained to value what we pay for. This works for a free market economy. It does not work for God's economy. So while we all know (mentally) that one of the reasons Christ came was to save us from our debt of sin, we don't sufficiently understand the magnitude of this in our hearts. If I were an orator or a poet of the highest magnitude, I might attempt to speak the words that would—just for a moment—give you a more full appreciation of this truth,

but I must instead be content with pointing out the fact that we fall short in our full grasping of the awesomeness of our salvation, and leave it up to each of you to wrestle through this with God in the days to come.

The second thing that Isaiah understood better than we do is really two things in one: God sent His Son to free us from the law, and thereby teach us how to really live. Isaiah was living under the mosaic law, which consisted of the 10 Commandments, and all the additional laws we read about in Numbers and Deuteronomy. This system was far from perfect and was a heavy burden on the Israelites. When I say *far from perfect*, that doesn't mean the law didn't accomplish what God meant it to. The law demonstrated both God's perfect holiness, and our inability to perfectly obey. It also taught justice by demanding fair treatment of one another. However, living under the law did not feel like freedom.

Isaiah must have known, even before God revealed it to him, that a better way was coming. I say that because Isaiah, and all the prophets, knew God in a special way. I'm willing to hazard a guess that some of the things we think the prophets were specifically told by God in fact, were not; they were simply understood by

the prophets who knew God so well, they could connect the dots and see what He was up to. It's sort of like a mom who saves her child right before disaster strikes because she knows the situation well enough to see what is about to happen. Did God reveal the future to her? No. She is simply in tune to what is going on. I think some, but not all, of the prophecy we read in the Old Testament is like that. I believe Isaiah, in his close relationship with God, was very aware of the shortcomings of the mosaic law and knew something better was on the way. By perfectly fulfilling the law, Jesus freed us from its burdens.

Titus 2:12-13 says that Jesus taught how to, "deny worldly desires, and to live sensibly...looking for the blessed hope...of the glory of our great God". Jesus came to teach us how to live in relationship with one another and with God. Both the horizontal and vertical relationships were changed in Christ, which the law alone could never do. In doing so, Jesus not only raises the bar to impossible heights, but He also provides the grace we need when we fall short. Having never lived under the weight of the law, I don't think we can fully appreciate what tremendous freedom it must have been no longer to live under the law and its many, many, many do's and don'ts. Isaiah could only peer into the future and long for that freedom.

Christ did something more than simply teach us how to live. The third reason God became Man was to empower us through the Holy Spirit to resist temptation—which is for our own good. If Christ had come to teach how to live, without empowering us to do so, it would be the height of frustration, like if I were to hold out a candy to Asher, but just a few inches too high for him to reach.

What I don't think we tend to understand today about Christ's empowerment is that it is tied directly to his kingship. Christ's birth, death, and resurrection was a sort of cosmic do-over, where instead of mankind suffering under an inheritance of original sin under Adam, we now also can receive an inheritance of grace under Christ. This inheritance is kept by the universal church, which is guided by the Holy Spirit. Imparted righteousness, that is the righteousness that God grants us for the here and now to resist temptation, is given only through the authority of our spiritual king. In writing that "the government shall be upon His shoulders" (Isaiah 9:6), Isaiah was not only prophesying that one day Christ will be our political ruler, but that from the day He was born, He would be our spiritual king, with all authority at His feet. Without such authority, He could not empower us to live better.

The reason I believe Isaiah understood this better than we do is because he was intimately familiar with how monarchy works, and with a government that made little effort to benefit commoners. Isaiah prophesied under three kings. He knew first-hand the power that they held, and he also could see the impact of good vs. bad kings. Because his calling was to implore the king to obey God, imagine how that must have sounded to Isaiah to have the Messiah as king. If Isaiah could have lived to see that, he would have been most happily out of a job.

Isaiah also lived at a time when injustice was rampant. Laws very much favored the powerful and wealthy. While we would probably agree that's still true today, it is much less so. Looking at American history, one can see a progression of further inclusion and justice for various groups that previously lacked political power, which includes basically everyone who isn't a white protestant male. I expect humankind will never see a perfectly just government, but unlike in Isaiah's day, we do have certain protections under the rule of law. So the more obvious injustice of Isaiah's day would have filled him all the more with a strong desire to see the justice and righteousness that would characterize Christ's kingdom, that Isaiah recorded in chapter nine, verse seven.

To make the link more plain between the empowerment to obey God and Christ's kingship, simply look at the Lord's Prayer. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

This is not a prayer about the future. Where is Christ's kingdom found?

Anywhere His will is done. The birth of Jesus began God's earthly invasion. It's a kingdom without territory, without a national language, and not limited by a certain ethnic group. Until the Kingdom of God finally crashes down and overwhelms all the Earth, the place to see it right now is in congregations and families around the world that are striving to live according to God's will. This is the Kingdom of God.

The last thing that Isaiah understood better than we do about why God had to send His Son was to suffer *with* us. Isaiah called the Messiah a "man of sorrows" (Isaiah 53:3); and not just because He would die on the cross. Jesus suffered grief at the loss of a friend. He suffered betrayal at the hands of a trusted companion. He also suffered the rejection of His own people who wouldn't listen to Him. He may have lost his father at an early age. Jesus did not have an easy life.

When we suffer pain and hardship, we tend to ask God *why*. We seem to think not only that suffering is some sort of strange anomaly, but also that as Christ followers, we deserve better. We even think we deserve an answer from God as to why we suffer. We will in almost all occasions never know why we suffer the things we do, but there is one comforting thought we should cling to: we are not alone. Christ suffered too. We don't serve a God who is completely removed from hardship. So instead of saying *why*, we should be saying *thank you*. I believe any person who has suffered greatly has either rejected God because of their lack of understanding, or came to realize that God was with them, so they held fast to their faith. The road of prophet brought with it tremendous emotional and spiritual suffering, so Isaiah had to have come to understand that God both comforts us and suffers with us.

In fact, the suffering of Christ is what we celebrate each and every Sunday when we receive the Eucharist, as we will be doing in a minute. When we think of communion, we tend to focus on Easter, but Christmas and Easter are inextricably linked. Jesus was born to save us from our sins as much as He died for that reason. Jesus was born to give us freedom from the law and teach us how to live. He was born to empower us to resist temptation as part of establishing His

kingdom on earth, which is recognized as the universal church. Jesus was born to suffer with us, as He still does today, because of His great love. I firmly believe Isaiah understood all this, and in many ways, better than we do. We may know all this on an intellectual level, but the challenge is for us to understand these truths at a gut level and live into them. That is the challenge of spiritual formation. That is the challenge of living for the King. And that is the challenge presented to every living person by the babe born this day in Bethlehem.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.