

Isaiah 53:10-12
John 3:12-17

HE CAME ANYWAY

What are you doing here? Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were not enough? *More* than enough. But unlike most of our nation, you figure that after the celebration, it is time to live the LIFE. And we do that by being part of the faith family – part of the people who worship together, and support each other, and carry and share it in all of our days. I am very grateful you feel that way too. And I am very grateful that Jesus is not a once-a-year man.

Watching the outsiders trying to deal with Christmas reminds me of a customs officer I once heard about. Over the years he had developed a remarkable sixth sense. He had one of those noses that could just smell it when people were trying to smuggle something over the border. Early one summer, a boy came riding up to the gate on a bicycle. There was a big box of sand on the back of the bicycle. The customs officer got that funny feeling, and he just knew something was “going on.” He carefully searched the box of sand but found nothing. All through the summer, about every four days, the boy would come on his bicycle with the same box of sand. The customs officer had been at his job a long time. He thought maybe he was being set up. Maybe the boy would come through with nothing until the officer got careless or lazy, and then he would begin to smuggle whatever it was he intended to smuggle. So all through the summer, the customs officer sifted the sand each time the boy came through. He checked the box, he checked the boy, he inspected the bicycle for secret containers. He even examined the bike to see if there was a way something might be hidden in the metal frame. But he could never find anything.

At the end of that summer, the customs officer retired and settled down to a leisurely life in the border town. One day he saw the boy on his bicycle. He stopped him and said, “I’m retired now. You have nothing to fear from me. But I’m so curious. I know you’re up to something. Please tell me: What is it that you’re smuggling?” The boy smiled and said, “Bicycles.”

What was God smuggling into the world at Christmas? HIMSELF! Most of the world keeps trying to find a magic potion or a secret ingredient that causes generosity or makes people be extra nice. We look for a warrior to fight our battles, a genie to grant our wishes, or a special leader who will

make our political causes be successful. But it's the bicycle: God wanting to be with us as we really are, so we can become who he really made us to be. That's the kind of magic that never blows away.

We keep looking at the presents, the wise men, the shepherds, the angels – wondering what it is about. We keep sifting through the sand of our hurts, disappointments, fears, successes – wondering if that is all there is. We keep checking the parties, the gifts, the gatherings, the food, the decorations. All the time, there He is, right out in the open: Christmas is the coming of Jesus. Jesus is what we are looking for. “*God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.*” That is what we really need and want: back in tune with God – back to the reality and awareness of what God is really like.

In all of the writings of the prophets, no passage is considered a clearer or more specific prediction of the coming Messiah than the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. Truly it is not a straight prediction. Most people leave out the ending and the context. But Isaiah is onto great themes – greater than he knows, and he is a mighty visionary. So the passage does portend the coming Messiah, in all the strange reversals that still leave our heads swimming.

We have been reading various sections of the chapter all through Advent. Its message has cued the sermons: Jesus was UNEXPECTED, DISOBEYED, UNLOVED. In the early verses, Isaiah's words are severe, serious, and grim. Today the victory note comes breaking through. Let it be so for you, too. We have held it off – felt the shock and contrast of holiness entering a fallen world. That is only the preparation and the ensuing adjustment. True, that is where we spend most of our lives – in the preparation and the ensuing adjustment. But today, let God's victory come breaking through.

God's victory is certain and total – at least that is our faith. But Christmas is more like the beginning. Even Easter is more of a beginning than an end. Still, they both point to the end, even as they hand us hope and joy and the mandates for what to do with ourselves in the meantime. So we celebrate Christmas with some hindsight and knowledge about the great victory cry. And God's victory, at least cut down to our level of perception, is at least threefold: First, the Son stayed faithful. Second, a new Kingdom was set up – an alternate choice and WAY of Life became available to humankind. Third, all who received the Son were endowed with power to become children of God. By the way, all of us – even the

earliest apostles – received the Son via the Holy Spirit. Who was being true, dynamic, or faithful before Pentecost? You can name them on no hands.

I.) THE SON STAYED FAITHFUL

We seldom think of the possibility that Jesus might have failed – that He might have been corrupted, or confused, or misled, or tempted to the point of ruining His mission and purpose. On the other hand, there is little indication in the Scriptures that Jesus Himself felt nonchalant or smug, or that He took His own faithfulness for granted. If anything, the reverse was true. Jesus seemed to have been far more intentional and disciplined about spiritual matters than we are. While He was more conscious of the power and presence of God, He was also more aware of His own human frailty and limitations. So Jesus spent *more* time in prayer than we do, *more* time pondering the Scriptures, *more* time matching His daily decisions and choices against both prayer and the Scriptures – shaping His life in the context of God’s personal presence with Him, *and* in the context of what God had been doing with faithful people in the generations before He came. Did the prophets predict Jesus, or did Jesus love and honor the vision and heritage of the prophets? Do you breathe “in,” or “out”?

It is always a tense and nervous time when you watch your children going into situations where you cannot intervene or control the outcome. I am aware of the foolishness of reading human feelings into God. I am also aware of the foolishness of not trying to read human feelings into God. That means not trying to comprehend anything about God or Christmas or Easter at all. Jesus called God “Father,” and sometimes “Daddy,” and I suspect that God as Daddy was frequently nervous and more than a little anxious about how the Son would fare in the strange and difficult circumstances of this earth.

Part of the job of a parent is to *believe* in a child from the beginning, and not just after all the trials are over. So I don’t mean that God was not counting on Jesus. God knew the quality and mettle of the Son he had sent. We feel it in the angel anthems, and even more at the baptism. It was unmistakable on the Mount of Transfiguration. But that does not mean the drama was staged or predictable. There was a lot at stake, and there was always that other possibility. God had plenty of experience with all the other children of the earth turning away from him, once they

became enmeshed in matter and focused on the affairs of this world. And then there was the thing with Lucifer.

So part of the victory cry we sense in Christmas is the choked-up heart of a Father so proud of his Son that he can hardly contain it. (Fortunately, in the tenth dimension you don't have to contain yourself as much as here, but we don't understand that, so we just call it "glory" and let it go at that.)

Anyway, Jesus had stayed loyal. When no one else was looking to God, He had looked to God. Beyond the place where humans formerly could stay faithful, He had stayed faithful. Jesus kept tuned to all the highest impulses that God kept feeding into His mind and soul. Many people want to do that, and I suppose all of us try at times, and for a while. Then the world gets harsher, or more raucous, or more alluring – like it always does for everybody. Finally Jesus was backed into a corner from which there was no escape except compromise or capitulation.

Yet neither came. The scene was set: Satan, as always, had managed to arrange and prepare everything. All was in readiness for earth to steal another child away from God. Only this time, it did not happen. No hasty retreat, no suing for terms, no plea for mercy or another chance. Nothing happened. Jesus stayed there in the Garden ... waiting. Do you ever meditate on the meaning of the two Gardens, Eden and Gethsemane? One is the quintessence of disobedience. The other is the quintessence of obedience. One separates us from God. The other reconciles us to God.

Anyway, in this second Garden – in Gethsemane – there was fear, but no panic; anguish, but no rebellion. He just kept absorbing it – kept centering on the Father and his will. Nothing happened – and in that "nothing," the most that has ever happened came to light. Jesus stayed true to God all the way. A child was born, only this one was different. The world has never quite recovered – never managed to laugh it off, rationalize it, or forget it. This One was different – the quintessence of obedience. And whether we comprehend it all or not, it smells so much like "home" that we are drawn to Him – we cannot help but love Him. What is the difference between choosing a willing obedience to God, and finding LOVE?

On the earthly side of it, Jesus gave no quarter and asked for none. He said, "Live for God." The world said, "Of course, but do it our way – and *for* us – because that is what God really wants, after all." The world

brought all of its threats and pressures to bear: failure, poverty, dishonor, persecution, suffering, death. That's about the list, isn't it? And in just this context – with loyalty to God at stake – no one ever told the world to “Go to Hell” more exquisitely, with clearer mandate, or with less compromising ardor than Jesus did. “You can kill me,” He said, “but you cannot change what I live for.” And no one ever did it with less malice, with as much compassion, with such a sincere affection and love – with such a total concern for the world's true benefit and need – than He did.

So, part of the victory was a personal victory for God. The Son had stayed faithful. Everything had depended upon that. But aside from everything that depended on it, it was still glorious in itself. The Son had stayed faithful! Looking back, that is part of the high note of the celebration – part of the joy of Christmas.

I would like to be one of the children who stays faithful. I cannot make that yet. Try as I might, it eludes me. So until I get it right, I figure to follow the One who knows how. That is the *only* reason I like Christmas: hope and love and life and purpose. Of course, that seems like quite a lot to me.

II.) A NEW KINGDOM WAS SET UP

The dead King is alive again, present and at work in the world. *He lives!* That is what we cry and sing on Easter. And if we could not sing and say that on Easter, Christmas would instantly pale to insignificance, don't you think? There can be Easter whether we know anything about Christmas or not. But there can be no Christmas unless we know Easter. “A child is born.” “Oh? What did he do? What makes him so special?” “Uh, nothing in particular. He never did anything special or unusual that we know about. He was just a really cute baby.” Great, so let's all buy presents for each other because nothing in particular really happened? That's the American Christmas. WE are talking about Christianity.

From time to time, I try to get you to do this little counting game with me. I was always taught to count “one, two, three, four ...” Like that. Okay, the First Coming of Jesus Christ is at Christmas – the birth, the Incarnation, God with us in human form. That is what the celebration is supposed to be about. And after this First Coming, we got rid of Him – killed Him on a Good Friday. He came once and we got rid of Him. I count that as “one.”

If we know He lives – if we have any conviction about who He is or how important He is – it must be because He came again. How else could we know? What do we call the coming after the First Coming? The “Second Coming,” right? So the Second Coming of Christ is the Resurrection – Easter. And if we like, we can include Pentecost and the other appearances of Jesus after the Crucifixion. In the New Testament, there is no distinction between the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The two run together and become interchangeable. (The earliest written witness to the Resurrection comes from the Apostle Paul: “*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*” (I Corinthians 15:8))

According to the Book of Revelation, the Second Coming of Christ is supposed to be a time when the faithful followers claim Christ’s leadership, spread the Gospel to all the world, and fight against the powers of evil in an effort to bring in the new reign of righteousness. It is also pictured as a time of severe testing and trial and suffering. (Flood, famine, earthquake, wars, rumors of wars, etc.) Do you have trouble recognizing it?

Some people are still waiting for the Second Coming. I think you ought to know that you are living right in the middle of it. An alternate Kingdom was set up, beginning with Easter and Pentecost. Some people are living in this New Kingdom even as we speak – even right here, with so-called “normal life” going on all around them. And that is part of the victory! We are no longer in bondage to this world if we do not want to be. Linking up with Jesus, no longer afraid of failure or death, the world can control us no longer. So we do not have to wait for a second Second Coming – we are living in it right now. Jesus, in the higher role of Holy Spirit, has already come again – He is already with us. The only thing we need to “wait” for is the Holy Spirit’s guidance – the daily sustenance and daily orders that keep us living in the New Kingdom each day.

So we are not caught in some backwash of history, waiting for God’s next phase to begin. We are already in the middle of it and part of it. NOW is the time Christ is building the new age. So there is a Third Coming, when we die – only, that is when WE come into a new realm. And maybe there is a fourth and a tenth and a hundredth coming that we do not need to know about yet. But there is a New Kingdom for us to live in RIGHT NOW! And that is part of the high note, the victory cry – part of the joy of Christmas. I do not like the old order; I’ve tried it. I want to be part of the NEW Kingdom. That is the *only* reason I like Christmas: hope and love and life and purpose. Of course, that seems like quite a lot to me.

III.) POWER TO BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD

This third victory, at least for me, is even better than the other two. It is not about what we do, but about what Christ does for us. Beyond the turmoil and the struggling that we do – bigger than whatever there is of our faithfulness and hope – Christ changes us. If we receive Him, through no fault or merit of our own we receive the power to become children of God. That is both an internal and an eternal change. That connects us with a drama greater than the earth, and more vast than time or space. Our souls are greater than our bodies. Any spiritual kindergarten knows that. All you have to do is notice what the body is like when the soul has departed. Anyway, we do not control or manage things on that level. We only discover that we are loved – and if we want to, we respond by loving back.

The New Kingdom we can be part of here is a wonderful thing, and it is the only thing worth living for here. But it is not going to succeed by our efforts or come to completion here, no matter how hard we try – not here on earth. We are not going to feed all the hungry, free all the oppressed, or love all the lonely. We are only supposed to die trying. We do learn that from the Cross, don't we? (Among other things.) But we are not going to make it here. Without losing one ounce of zeal or determination – without ever using it as a cop-out against doing what we *can* accomplish – we need to come to terms with the fact that we are not going to make it here. This place is too small, too limited by time and space, too estranged from the Father.

The third victory means that none of this really matters. We are not going to make it here, but we have it made – because Christ loves us. The power of “trust in love” changes us into children of God. It does not happen suddenly, like conversion sometimes seems to. Conversion only gets it started. Slowly we are transformed into God's children – into people of peace and wisdom, into people of grace and love. That brings us back to why the baby was born. Some imaginary quota of righteous deeds is not really the purpose. The quality of *being* and the WAY of relating are what finally matter – who we are and how we express that ... with ourselves, with each other, and with God.

The whole drama of creation has been like a vast and complex game of hide-and-go-seek. People keep hiding from God, and no matter how often God finds them, they keep running and hiding again. It started in that first Garden so long ago, when Adam and Eve hid themselves from

God. It has been that way ever since, generation after generation, until hiding seems to be the only thing any of us know how to do. Some people say it is still so. At least all of us still know the game and play it every time we are afraid, confused, or go semiconscious. The world is full of diversions, and hiding from God is its primary preoccupation.

But Christmas has changed that, and keeps on changing it. A “man” came who ate not only the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, but also the fruit of the Tree of Trust and Love. They call it the Tree of Life. And He stopped running and hiding from God. It was the craziest thing the world had ever seen. He simply refused to go hide. He kept on waiting for God, and waiting *with* God. He did everything in the open with God. And He did the unspeakable and the unheard of: He asked what God wanted first, and what He and other people wanted second. “*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God*”

The repercussions of Adam’s disobedience were enormous. The repercussions of Jesus’ obedience are also enormous. Since His coming, nobody who has known Him has had to run or hide from God. Instead, they receive the power to become children of God.

And that is why we celebrate. It is not just that the Messiah is unexpected, disobeyed, and unloved. That is all true, and we need to know it. But what makes the celebration so wondrous is that He comes anyway! And He comes bringing victory in His wake: Victory in His faithfulness. Victory in a New Kingdom that He makes available to us. Victory in a love that transforms us into God’s children.

He comes anyway! Knowing the reception will be poor. Knowing we are not prepared. Knowing we are not yet obedient. Knowing we will not always love Him back. But He comes anyway! There is nothing on earth so strange and wondrous. He comes anyway! I never know whether to weep or rejoice. But in either and both, unspeakable gratitude wells up in my soul.