

“God’s Christmas Zeal”

Isaiah 9:1-7

Christmas Eve, December 24th, 2013

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...and may God who was born as a baby to save us grant you a Christmas this year that fills your heart and soul with peace that is eternal. Amen. Pastor Mueller and I have been presenting to you the Christmas prophecies of the prophet Isaiah since the evening before Thanksgiving (both the manuscripts and audio versions are available on our website). These are prophecies which proclaim what God was going to accomplish to save you long before the events occurred. This is a historical fact. All history scholars recognize that the Old Testament was in fact written *before* the New Testament so that we have record of a miracle (in fact *many* miracles): Isaiah looked forward into time and proclaimed these things as if they had already occurred.

And then they occurred. His batting average is a thousand; his record is perfect. These prophecies are not like -- for example -- Nastradamus whose so-called “prophecies” are so general and obscure, one can make them apply to just about anything. Isaiah gets into detail and his prophecies were fulfilled centuries after he wrote...in and through the real, historical person named Jesus of Nazareth. There are many reasons to have confidence that the Christian faith is true – literally dozens of reasons – but if the fulfillment of prophecy was the *only* reason you had for its truth claims, it would be more than sufficient.

This is testimony to the fact that the Bible is not myth or fairy-tale, but it tells the truth about human history; it tells the truth of what is true about God towards you. I can’t think of a more exciting thing to be doing this Christmas Eve than proclaiming to you about what is true in regards to God’s relationship with you and it is full of Good News, Phenomenal News, Fantastic News...but not “fantastic” in the sense of fantasy, but “fantastic” in the sense of wondrous and glorious and magnificent and marvelous!

This time I have the privilege and pleasure of presenting what the Word of the Lord says in Isaiah 9:1-7. First of all the historical context really is important, so please lend me your ears to understand a little bit of it. I promise to keep it succinct: God’s people were in a lot of trouble. From the time of Isaiah’s writing: the Assyrian foreign invaders had already conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722-721 B.C., and the Southern Kingdom which Isaiah was serving was later threatened by the Assyrian King, Sennacherib in 701 B.C. Eventually – and Isaiah already knew it as he wrote – the Kingdom of Judah would be overcome by other foreign invaders, the Babylonians about a century and a half later. So in simple terms, we have an idea

why our text from Isaiah 9 starts off with the words that God's people who were attacked and conquered were in anguish (verse 1), were brought to contempt (verse 1), and that they were people "who walked in darkness" (verse 2).

But why did anguish and darkness of unbelief occur? We live in a day and age that can't seem to spit it out, because the sinful nature hates being accountable, it hates admitting what is true, it hates taking responsibility. No one wants to hear that they are sinners, no one wants to admit that they are wrong, no one wants to admit that they did what they should not have done; and no one wants to confess that they are still doing what they should not be doing. Instead, we want to claim to be victims and everyone else is responsible for our wrongdoing and sin. Or -- and this is becoming even more rampant -- the very concept of right and wrong is just starting to fade. We live in a time that just about anything is justified; just about anything is excusable, because that is -- as they say -- just the way we are; the way we're born; the way it is.

But let's not give ourselves too much credit. It is not as though sin suddenly came into existence in the 1960's or when we discovered smart-phones. Sin was rampant among God's chosen people during the time of Isaiah. The anguish and the darkness did not come from God. God did not create sin; sin is not a created thing at all; nor does God tempt anyone to sin (James 1:13). But the historical fact is that God's people rejected God. They forgot about Him. They transferred themselves from a state of faith to a state of apostasy. God's people stopped living in faith and they rejected the ways of God and chose their own ways of sin instead.

There is only one reason for anguish and darkness and it is because of man's rebellion against God. Some get a little more philosophically sophisticated while objecting: "Ah, but what about natural evil, the senseless natural disasters that cause such enormous suffering -- even to little children -- not dependent on the intentional and moral evil of people?!" Sorry, this is not a valid complaint against the faith either, because the Scriptures inform us that man's rebellion -- the rebellion of the vice regents of God, the appointed stewards of God over the entire creation -- are also responsible even for the natural groaning of the created order (Romans 8). When man sinned, the condition of sin entered the world. Terrible things happen because people hate God; terrible things happen because people rebel against their Creator; terrible things happen because people are unfaithful towards their Savior; and terrible things happen because people are resentful towards the gracious Spirit who would otherwise bring us to Christ. That is why all suffering and anguish occurs -- no matter how much we want to turn it around and blame God instead -- this is why there is darkness. We have rejected the light of God.

The people of Israel were guilty of this basic sin in the time of Isaiah and we are guilty of it in our time as well. In our great nation, the United States of America, we are witnesses in the

early part of this new century of our country losing her faith. It is a sad and alarming commentary when a country once owing a strong national conscience well-familiar with the Ten Commandments has now taken a ludicrous over-reaction to Jefferson's famous "wall of separation" between church and state. This was never the intention of the framers of our Constitution. But let's not keep sin at too-far a distance, because we see it in ourselves as well. We treat God's Word like 31-flavors at Baskin' Robins. That is, we go along with God's Word to a point, but at the precise juncture that it prohibits our doing what we really want to do, then we excuse ourselves...we rebel and then sleep just fine at night. This is sin and this is rebellion. God says to worship, we say, "Nah, that's ok; " God says to forgive our enemies, we say, "Nah, don't want to;" God says to pray on all occasions even when things aren't going our way, we say, "Nah, don't feel like it." We keep rejecting Him and we wonder why there is darkness in our lives.

Given these circumstances: if you were God who had given gracious gift after gracious gift to His people; having demonstrated mercy and loving-kindness over and over again; having performed great and powerful miracles to deliver His people over and over again, but only to be rejected and forgotten over and over again, who could blame you for just giving such people exactly what they deserve?!

Christmas my dear Christians is proof that God not only does *not give us exactly what we deserve, but is proof positive that God gives the exact opposite of what we deserve*. This is why "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" checking twice his list of who's naughty or nice will forever be diametrically opposed to true Christmas hymns: Christmas has nothing to do with what we deserve, or can earn, or can merit. Christmas is precisely opposed to all of these ideas about "what we deserve." Thank God that He does *not* give us what we deserve! Instead, His answer to us is Christmas! God's gift of what we do *not* deserve!

My parents at the end of the day were always an example of this kind of merciful love, because I was a mischievous kid. One Christmas I got a new B-B rifle with which I promptly shot a hole through one of our windows...the rifle was immediately confiscated. I lost my gift almost as fast as I had ripped it out of the wrapping! But do you think this kept my parents from their generosity towards me? One evening I came home from Karate and wanted to show my mom the progress I was making with some of my kicks. I wanted to show her how easy I could put my leg over one of the dining room chairs. The heel of my foot landed right on top of my mother's Ethan Allan and I broke the chair. This was the kind of kid my parents had to put up with. I'm convinced that I had been mostly responsible for their white hairs. And yet, I just didn't get what I deserved. The two incidents are just the top of the heap and I had better stop there since this is a public sermon. Still, the last time I went to see my dear mother, there she was at

88 spoiling me with great food and loving hospitality...she is a picture of God's Christmas love and mercy in Christ.

Of course my childhood example is nothing compared to the full extent of God's Christmas grace! God knows that we are not "fair with a chance of sin"; rather He knows that in accord with our sin, we are rebels. We forget about Him, fight against Him, and reject His Word. We are not in our sin, partly apostate, but fully apostate; in our sin we are in darkness, we are contemptible and our natural state is to know the anguish which our sin produces...and yet, God's response to you is Christmas: the total, 100% demonstration of grace; not waiting for you to get your act together; not waiting for you to ask Jesus into your heart; not waiting for you to pretty up your act; and not waiting for you to do anything...but while you and I were yet sinners, God sent His Son (Romans 5); while we were enemies of God, God gave Christmas which is His 100% love and mercy and forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus is the great light who invades your darkness. Jesus is the light of the world who overcomes the unbelieving darkness that covers our hearts and souls; it is a light that is so bright with forgiveness and mercy that the darkness has to flee out of you...it has no choice, the light of Jesus is too bright. This is why dear Christmas Christians that we who know this light cherish the Word and Sacraments that give us Jesus, because to have Jesus is to have His light that causes all darkness to run and hide. It is so easy to spiral into darkness, into deep, dark holes of sin and the demonic that calls what is sinful good and what is good sinful...but when God's light is continually poured out upon you then darkness like a cancer melts through the radiation that is the Light of the World. Jesus the source of all life gives His light to sinners in darkness and then the next thing you know, you're not in darkness anymore. The Word proclaims in 2nd Samuel 22:29: ***"For you are my lamp, O Lord, and my God lightens my darkness."***

The light of God undoes the enslaving work of sin. In our text sin is presented as a taskmaster, a slave-driver. Verse 4 describes a yoke of burden, a staff on our shoulder and a rod that oppresses...these Jesus has broken. This means that the shackles of your sin have been undone. How can this be?

The answer lies in the details about your Christmas gift Jesus. "For to us a child is born," Isaiah had made the prophetic prediction of the virgin who would bear a son in Isaiah chapter 7 and in Isaiah chapter 9 the prophet describes the fulfillment of what was going to occur from his standpoint and for what has already occurred from our standpoint. Prophecy has been proven true: the child from the virgin was born. He is a "son" – and that's crucial – because He was a son from King David's royal line. He was a king's son from the king's line that God Himself appointed and this throne God said would be for an *eternal kingdom* (2nd Samuel 7:13)!

Isaiah went on to describe your king:

“and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end...The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”

You and all of God’s people are the government – the nation of people led by the King of Love – who rests on Jesus’ shoulder. Ambrose wrote, “[Christ] bowed his shoulder to labor, bowed himself to the cross, to carry our sins. For that reason the prophet says, ‘whose government is on his shoulder.’ This means, above the passion of his body is the power of his divinity, or it refers to the cross that towers above his body. Therefore he bowed his shoulder, applying himself to the plow – patient in the endurance of all insults, and so subject to affliction that he was wounded on account of our iniquities and weakened on account of our sins.” (Ancient Christian Commentary, Old Testament Vol 10, p 71)

That’s the kind of King you have. That’s not the way the world does it right? In the world, people serve the kings, but with this -- your King and Savior -- the King serves you! You are upon his shoulder so that He can serve you and save you from your sins. In this holy service, He is known as “Wonderful Counselor”: the word “wonderful” expresses that this King will never lead us astray. Unlike the folly and foolishness of earthly kings, our Christmas King Jesus uses wondrous counsel. The word “wonderful” in connection to counsel means that the depth of His wisdom is boundless, far beyond what we can even imagine. In God’s Word, Sampson’s father Manoah once asked the angel of the Lord/God Himself: “what is your name?” To which God replied, ***“Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?”*** (Judges 13:17-18) It is beyond all human understanding and in Jesus’ wonderful counsel He demonstrated that in weakness there is strength, in surrender there is victory, and in death there is life (Oswalt, *The New International Commentary On The Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39*, 247)...the world continues to sneer at the saving ministry of the Savior who was born to go to the cross, but in this cross we see that Christ is the wisdom and power of God (1st Cor. 1:24)! No wonder Isaiah also calls Him “Mighty God” who is able to overcome all evil in us and in the world!

He is also -- and to me this title is the most intriguing title and at the end of the day, perhaps the most comforting -- “Everlasting Father.” No, this does not mean that Jesus the Son of God is the Heavenly Father. The Father and the Son are separate persons of the Holy Trinity. At the same time, Jesus is also like a father to the extent that it is also appropriate to call him “Everlasting Father.” It is important to know why He is called this. In this world that is lacking so many good and faithful fathers as too many have forsaken their families, we have in Christ our King a guardian who is tender and faithful, and like a faithful father He trains, and protects His

children. He loves you so much that He did not hesitate to give away His own life for you. He is your father in the sense of being your Good Shepherd who cares and provides for you. So you see you really do have a faithful father; a father who will never let you down. Listen to this description of Jesus your father:

Psalm 72:12-13: ***“For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. ¹³He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.”***

Finally, Jesus is your Prince of Peace. You once had no peace as a sinner alienated from your Creator-God, but through Jesus' blood and righteousness you have been restored in your relationship with God. No matter the tumultuous lack of peace we may experience in this life, the kingdom of God is now yours since you have peace with God through the blood of the Lamb!

What is most remarkable is what drives Jesus to be all of this for you. He accomplishes this out of His zeal. This word is associated with the very best sense of the word jealousy. I once heard about the testimony of a very famous person who left the Christian faith and went on to espouse New Age religion. Why? Because she once heard her Christian pastor proclaim that God is a jealous God. The very famous celebrity assumed that the word “jealous” was to be taken in the sinful and insecure sense, but this is not what it means when it is applied to Jesus. Godly jealousy is a glowing fire that is designed and determined to protect the object of its love against anything and everything that threatens the beloved. Godly jealousy or zeal will do anything to save that which is loved. Jesus loves you with this kind zeal and this kind of holy jealousy -- such a glowing fire of love it is -- that He was even willing to save you from yourself. He would not permit your sin to destroy you, so He came with Christmas zeal to save.

We live in a world that celebrates Christmas with vast distractions of toys, and food, and drink that are often used to forget about the darkness and the anguish that confronts us in this life, but tonight we are mindful that God's gift is Jesus and in His zeal all of that darkness and all of that anguish has been conquered by your Wonderful Counselor, your Mighty God, your Everlasting Father, and your Prince of Peace. And while in faith we must wait for the full effects of this salvation, already that faith has given us Jesus right here and right now; already we have enough to turn from sin and to turn to Jesus.