

The Work of Christmas

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Isaiah 61:10-11, 62:1-3

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.
For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. Isaiah 61:10-11, 62:1-3

Let's pray together. *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

So last year, we did not take our Christmas tree down until February 1. We usually take it down around Epiphany, and we were busy that week, so it didn't happen. Then it just didn't happen again the next weekend. Then I decided that I like the joy of having the Christmas tree up. I wanted to continue the Christmas season in my house, so we decided to leave it up a little

bit longer. And to be honest, I suspect that we're going to have an extended season with our Christmas tree again this year.

But that's not the case if you look around. If you go out into the world, like into a retail store. If you go to Target this afternoon, you're going to see that all the Christmas stuff is already marked down. They have clearance bins everywhere – everything with Santas on them because they're ready to move them out and get started on Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day and move on to the next thing. And if you turn on the radio in your car and listen to Sunny 99.1, which has been playing Christmas songs since, I swear, the day after Halloween, they're already back to playing Whitney Houston and Taylor Swift and JLo. Because it's December 27, and Christmas is over.

I suspect that many of us approach Christmas that way. We get through the Advent season and the joy that comes within this whole journey toward Christmas, but our eyes are on the prize – we're really longing for December 25.

On about December 10 of this past year, our daughter Mary Holland who is two, got under the tree and began unwrapping presents. By the time Whitney and I found her, she'd unwrapped several gifts from her cousins, and we had to rewrap them and then put them back. We had to explain to her that you don't open the presents until Christmas. So every single day before Christmas, she'd ask us, "Is it Christmas yet? Is tomorrow Christmas? Is today Christmas?" That's because she had her eye on the prize of the day that she could unwrap all of the presents.

But then Christmas happens, this big day that we've been long for and looking for, and we get to the next day, and the afterglow of the candlelight Christmas Eve service has worn off, and we've put away all of our gifts, and we're no longer with our family and our friends. I think a lot of us look around and think, "Is that it?" There's a sense of emptiness and disappointment because we've built up that day, and we didn't look past it.

The Israelites 2500 years ago had that same sense of longing and looking forward to something and then disappointment when they returned to Jerusalem. When they were in Exile, Isaiah promised them that God would restore them, that God would bring them back to their land. Isaiah 54 says, "I am about to rebuild you with stones of turquoise, lay your foundations with sapphires, construct your towers with rubies and your gates with jewels. And all your walls with precious stones." This meant 50 years in the wilderness, hearing that and looking forward to their return. They spent 50 years building up in their minds how wonderful that return would be.

Then they got there, and it was not at all what they remembered. It was not wonderful. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai tell us that they were opposed at every turn in the rebuilding process by the folks living there. That they couldn't find homesteads or get anything to grow so they didn't have enough to eat and they were hungry. Their city lay in ruins still fifty years later from the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar. Surely they got there after all that longing and buildup and thought," Is this all there is?"

But Isaiah reminds them that God's promises remain. He tells them to look past what they see, and he declares that God has clothed them in robes of righteousness. God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations that other nations will see their beauty that they will be so changed that they will be given a new name.

And Isaiah is able to make these declarations because God has made these promises. If we look at verse 10, it is a picture of a wedding party. It talks about the bride and the groom being transformed.

How often do you go to a wedding of somebody you know, and you're sitting there waiting for the bride to come down the aisle, and you're looking at the groom. You're thinking, "Wow – he or she looks like a different person."

I think the beautiful gowns and the magic of makeup, and a tuxedo totally transforms people. So God is painting that same picture here, but instead of a physical transformation, there will be a spiritual transformation. It will be the garments of salvation and the robes of righteousness that they will wear. And Isaiah says that they will be called by a new name.

When we think in Scripture about name changes, immediately we think of Abram becoming Abraham and Jacob becoming Israel. And when God changed their names, it represented a promise, something new that was happening in them. So God's promising here that "you will no longer be known as exiles you will be known as 'my people.'" Their names will be changed. Isaiah's basically telling them, "Stick with it! There is more to come. This is a gift, but it's not the only one. As the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all of the nations."

It must have felt that this return that they had longed for and anticipated was the end. But Isaiah was saying here was that it was just the beginning.

When I was studying this text, I couldn't help but think of 2020 and 2021 and how in our minds created this sense that 2021 is the destination because 2020 has been a terrible journey. I can't tell you how many times things have gone sideways, and I've said, "Well, that's just 2020 for you." A few weeks ago, I sent out an email with some Zoom information in it to about 600 people, and I got an email from Zoom that they'd done a security update, and my meetings had been wiped, and all new ones had to be recreated. So I had to email 600 people and say, "Sorry – here's the new and actual Zoom information. How 2020 is this!"

It's because I've created this illusion in my mind that bad things happen in 2020, but when it's over and we're in 2021, all shall be set right. That's my destination. And I'm here to tell you, friends, that that destination is quickly approaching. And if I keep up that attitude, if we all keep up this sense that 2020 is the worst part, it's our exile, but 2021 is our return. It's Christmas Day, and it will be perfect; we'll be sorely disappointed on Friday morning.

But it's not the end. It's the beginning. There are promises and hope on the horizon. As Christians, we are meant to live in both the *already* and the *not yet*. Through Jesus, God has inaugurated the Kingdom of God, but it's not yet fully realized.

And similarly, Isaiah tells the people, "Look past your current turmoil. Look ahead to the future and what God is doing. Creating a new thing." And for us, it's the same thing; we need to look past our current struggles and look to the hope and the promise of God.

The theologian Miroslav Volf writes this about hope: "Optimism is based on the possibilities of things as they have come to be. Hope is based on the possibilities of God irrespective of how things are. Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God and therefore on the effectiveness of God's promise."

And our call is not just to be hopeful for ourselves. Our call is to share hope with the world. That is the work of Christmas. No matter what, Target or the Hallmark Channel or your disassembly of decorations or the radio stations tell you - Christmas is not over. The work of Christmas is actually just beginning. It's not an endpoint. The birth of Jesus is not our final destination; it's the beginning. As Dr. Pace reminded us a few weeks ago, the defeat of all evil, global peace, the end of suffering, the Messianic Age has been inaugurated. But just because the Messiah has come, it has not been fulfilled. It is an ongoing work that is just beginning.

In his poem “The Work of Christmas” from which I stole this sermon title, Howard Thurman writes: “When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner, To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among people, To make music in the heart.”

Where did Howard Thurman get that from? We don’t read any Scripture as an island. Everything fits in a larger context, so if we look a few verses before our Scripture for today at the beginning of Isaiah 61, there is a prescription for the work of Christmas – the work that the Messiah does. It says, “He will bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, release the prisoners and comfort those who mourn.” And in Isaiah 62:1, he says he will not keep silent nor rest until God’s promises have been fulfilled.

Folks that is our charge, too. We don’t stay silent; we proclaim the good news. We don’t rest because we *become* the good news. We go out, and we share that hope with others. We once were lost but now are found. And so, in turn, we look out toward those who are lost as well. And hasn’t this year given us more motivation than ever to serve others? I’ve seen creativity abound in ways that we are reaching out. We have a drive-through line every week to drop off food for C.C.S.C., and some folks are clipping coupons for military families, and people who leave anonymous acts of kindness on others’ doors. And students are being mentored through Zoom. I was part of an epic chain at a Starbucks of “pay it forward.” But I’ve also heard from a number of you who are so frustrated by the limitations that 2020 has put on how we can serve others because you are feeling more motivated than ever to love others. I think part of that has come from the realization of what we have taken for granted. This realization that we have often made our hope and our salvation a personal thing. And we haven’t turned outwards often enough.

We are reminded in this season of Christmas that the hope that comes from Jesus being born for all people means that our charge is to carry that hope to the whole world. The world is dark, but the dawn from on high is breaking in upon us. I’m reminded of Henry Blackaby’s book *Experiencing God*, where he wrote that we are to look for where God is already working and join in on that work.

My friend Donna lost her husband about a year and a half ago, and her friends have come up with a clever thing they called the “husband app.” So whenever she has something around her house that needs to be done, whether it’s bringing plants in before a freeze or fixing a ceiling fan,

she just calls someone on her “husband app,” and they come around. One of her friends sends a husband to do that work for her. And in the darkness of her grief, do you know what a light that is, breaking in for her?

I think about how Houston is the second most food insecure city in our country. There are some estimates that put it at 20% of folks right now don't know where their next meal will come from or don't have enough money to buy food. That's one in five of us in our community. And this year, because of your generosity C.C.S.C. has been able to give away 20,000 bags of food. To put that in perspective, last year, C.C.S.C. gave away 8,500 bags of food. You have more than doubled it. Because in the dark days of someone who has to come and pick up a bag of food for their family, you have created a bright and shining light.

Whenever you roll down your window at a stoplight and give a bag to someone who's experiencing homelessness, you are doing the work of Christmas. When you pick up the phone and call a friend that's experiencing grief or frustration, or heartache, you are doing the work of Christmas. When you make a sacrifice in your own life so that you can make a gift to better somebody else's life, you are doing the work of Christmas. When you extend kindness to someone who doesn't deserve it or make amends, you are doing the work of Christmas. You are bringing light into this world of darkness and doing the work of Christmas.

Let's pray together. *God, we give you thanks that your spirit fills us up, moves us forward, and helps us share your love with everybody. God, in the coming days and weeks, we pray that you would open our eyes to opportunities to continue to do this work of Christmas. And that you might open our hands so that we would serve everybody we meet. We love you, and we pray this in your name. Amen.*