



Isaiah 57:14-21
The Real Gifts of Christmas
“Peace”

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Well, on this last Sunday in Advent that is also Christmas Eve, we are drawing our Advent series to a close. We will start a new series this evening that I believe will not only help shape disciples of Jesus who already follow him, but I believe will also be of interest to people who aren't Jesus followers and I pray will lead them toward Jesus. While I'm speaking mostly to the Rose Hill family who are committed to our vision of “leading people toward Jesus where we live work and play,” I want to say a word about that series now. The new series is titled, “What Might Jesus Say To...” and then each Sunday we'll look at a well-known person. If there are people in your life who you have been praying for, or have had the opportunity to talk a little about your faith, or at least share that you are a Jesus follower, and where there has been a certain degree of openness to Jesus...this series will be a prime opportunity to invite someone. Maybe someone you know is a fan of one of the people we'll look at and they might be curious what Jesus might say to them.

So, consider inviting people to join you each Sunday, starting tonight. The number one reason people go to a church for the first time is because someone invited them. There are cards about the series in the lobby you can pick up and use if that helps; an email went out on Friday to the church family that you can easily forward for tonight's service, or pass along in a text message even, and invite someone to join you tonight or an upcoming Sunday in this series.

But this morning we wrap up our series on the Real Gifts of Christmas, the gifts that God gives us through Jesus: Hope, Joy, Love...and today we are looking at the gift of peace. As we've explored each of these gifts, we have done so through the lens of Isaiah, the Old Testament book that connects so strongly to the New Testament and to Jesus' life in particular, because of the nature of Isaiah's prophecy. So much of what he writes not only is about getting Israel back on the straight and narrow path with God, but is also about something new that God is going to do through a future messenger, a future messiah king. And some 600+ years later, Jesus fulfills what Isaiah writes of.

Now, at the time of his writing, just as a final reminder: Israel was in chaos. The northern Kingdom is particularly disrupted, in the midst of exile, the Southern Kingdom is threatened and on edge. And Isaiah has some strong words about how they have gotten sideways with God. They have not kept up their part of the Covenant, and the exile and the turmoil they're facing and in the midst of is the result of that. It is God's judgment on them, his discipline of them, to get them back in line.

For instance, let me read some selected phrases and sentences from Isaiah 57:1-13, to give you a taste of it. This is God speaking through Isaiah: "You...sons of a sorceress...whom are you mocking? At whom do you sneer and stick out your tongue?...You sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags...To idols you have poured out drink offerings and offered grain offerings...You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill; there you went up to offer your sacrifices. You have put up pagan symbols. Forsaking me...you went to Molech...but you would not say 'it is hopeless'. When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you. But the one who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain." Then we get to today's passage, **Isaiah 57:14-21**. Listen to the difference of the message, and the difference of the tone.

The first 13 verses stand in stark contrast to nearly all of the rest of the chapter that we just read, until you get to the last couple verses, which then harken back to the first 13 verses. This is far from the only place you see this contrast of God's judgment and anger with his grace and mercy. **The book of Isaiah is kind of like a yo-yo – up one moment, down the next, back up, back down, back up, back down. Judgment, grace, judgment, grace... and on it goes. Chapter 57 is a great example of this.**

So, verse 14 talks about a road and a way, and making it clear for God's people. A couple Sundays ago, on Worship through Music Sunday, I gave a little 2 minute devotional on Isaiah 35 which in the last couple verses revolves around this theme of a highway, a roadway, on which God's people will travel on their way to redemption, on their way back to Zion, back to Israel, though I would suggest it's more than an earthly fulfilled prophecy,

but an eternal one as well for those who are in relationship with God. And Isaiah writes that on this highway there will be no lions, tigers or bears – Oh my! Those who travel on it will be safe there. No obstacles. No pitfalls. No snares. And verse 14 today, echoes that famous chapter.

Then in verse 15 we have an incredible synopsis of who God is. He is the high and exalted one who lives forever, whose name is holy. He lives in a high and holy place, but he also lives with those who are contrite and lowly in spirit...One of his names is “Emmanuel” and it means “God with us.”

But being with us is a means to another end. **God is with those who are lowly in spirit and contrite for the purpose of reviving them.** Shafal is the Hebrew word for “lowly” and it means “low (both in height, but also low in one’s place in life), humble, humiliated, lowly” it can even mean “depressed.” So, given Israel’s fall into the hands of the Assyrians and all the chaos they were facing, this is exactly them. They are humiliated, probably depressed collectively as a people and certainly some on the individual level as well, and they are low. They are down in the dumps. So, they are lowly, and also “contrite.” “Contrite” is not probably a very good translation, though it is true that we need to be contrite when we’ve been high and mighty and we’ve fallen a long ways down. But the English word “contrite” means “sorry, remorseful, repentant, apologetic” and so forth. And that certainly is a Biblical response to God and to people in regards to our sin; we need to be contrite.

But the Hebrew word here is “Dawhgaw” (Try saying that!). And all the Hebrew dictionaries and Lexicons give the meaning of this word as “to crumble, to bruise, to beat to pieces, to be crushed, to be broken.” They do list “to be contrite” but when you look at the range of meaning, that’s kind of on the lighter side of the definition. It feels a bit surface-y or something like that. What’s really being said here is that God is with those who are lowly, depressed, and humiliated, and also with those who are crushed, broken, beaten down...and yes, with those who are contrite or remorseful for their role that led to being crushed and beaten down. But God is with us when we’re feeling that way.

And when you get to verse 18 we read that God will heal, guide (or lead), and restore; specifically, he will “restore comfort” to Israel’s mourners. He heals, guides, and restores comfort to those who mourn, who grieve. These are those people who are lowly and broken in verse 15. They start in one place, but end up in another, because of the grace of God.

So, God is high and holy, and God is with us in the lowest parts of life as well. *And* he’s not just with us, and that’s it. **He’s with us for the purpose of reviving us.** Reviving our hearts, reviving our spirits. Some of us here this morning, as we’re seated right now, are described by these kinds of words. We’re feeling bruised, beaten, humiliated, maybe even depressed. But when your heart is open to God...when your mind, as Paul puts it in Romans, has been renewed and is open to the presence of God with you – not just “up there and out there somewhere,” but that God is here with you now in the middle of the valley of the shadow of death, the valley of the shadow of depression, the valley of the shadow of difficulty, the valley of the shadow of defeat...Whatever it is that is breaking you: when you know that God is there with you in those situations and he wants to revive you, to resuscitate you, to redeem you...I mean, that’s powerful; You’re not alone.

This mission of revival is a word of encouragement that probably a lot of us need to hear this morning; and if it isn’t *this* morning it’s going to be *tomorrow* morning. Well, hopefully not literally tomorrow morning – if it is, then it means you got coal in your stocking, or your gifts weren’t very good, or you didn’t give good gifts, I guess. So maybe it’s the morning after that, or after that... ***At some point in time you’re going to need to be reminded that God wants to revive you, and redeem you, and get you out of the pit of brokenness and despair that you feel like you’re in.*** And to help get you out, he’s right there with you.

Verse 16 tells us that God is not going to be angry with them forever. I think often when we read these verses, we get upset that God would be angry at all. How can God judge them or be angry with them? God is love, right? And that’s not just a New Testament view of God...God loves Israel with an everlasting love. We read that in Jeremiah 31:3. That’s squarely Old Testament. So how can God be angry at them? How can God allow this exile

to happen? Why would God do this? Well, if the Israelites had not engaged in all the stuff we read about in the first 13 verses, he wouldn't have. In today's parenting language, we call this "natural consequences." We parents know that love sets boundaries and enforces consequences. It's a facet of love. God's love has this same facet.

Verse 17 is a bit of a summary of the first 13 verses, and we see that God's judgment was provoked by Israel's sinful greed and the willful ways that Israel kept persisting in. The prophets would keep telling them, "Get back in line with God...cut out the idols...cut out the offerings to false gods..." but they keep persisting in their own prideful ways, following their own wills, rather than following God's will. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" was not their motto or their prayer. So, calamity strikes. Again, it's just a re-cap of what's been said before.

But God does not forsake them or abandon them. He is with them, as we already have seen. **So, God heals, leads and restores comfort to those who are broken and hurting after their time of waywardness and its consequences (verse 18). This, verse 19 then says, "creates praise on their lips."** Those who mourned, those who grieved, because they were broken and humiliated and beaten down as a result of their own willful pride...they end up praising God because of his restorative work. God's work in our lives of healing and redemption is why we praise him.

Specifically, for us on this side of Christmas, Jesus Christ is the road (to use the verse 14 word) for this redemption. He fulfills the Old Testament covenant, he's the sacrifice for sin, he has satisfied God's judgment at our waywardness and our own idol-worship...and because of that – because God loves us enough to have given us Jesus – we give him all the praise, all the glory, all the worship. **God's activity leads to our praise of Him.** Some of you know the worship song that goes like this: "You praise will, ever be on my lips, ever be on my lips; your praise will ever be on my lips." Psalm 34:1 specifically is what inspired that song, but it could have been this verse. Praise is on the lips of those who mourned, because of God's work in their lives.

And the final word here about this is the peace (shalom) that we have with God. Such a great Hebrew word. In fact, it's such a great word, we get it twice. Like ice cream, one scoop isn't enough. (Free bit of gospel truth for you this morning there!) Got to have two. So, Shalom, Shalom. This peace is for those who receive God's healing. It's for those who turn and come back to him. For those who don't, for those who remain in their own stubborn and willful ways, there is no peace as the last couple verses speak to; those people are staying stuck in the ways of the first 13 verses.

So, if life has dealt you some blows and you're a little beat up, a little bruised, broken, and lowly, God can lead you heal you and redeem you, if you will allow yourself to be led. It takes humility to acknowledge that our own ways take us down the wrong path, and that we need to follow God's leading in our life. But when we do that, the peace that we so deeply desire, is the outcome. Jesus himself came to give us this peace. It's one of the true gifts of Christmas. He says himself, **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid"** (Jesus, in John 14:27). The peace that he offers is not a peace we can give ourselves; it's not a peace from this world. Peace that the world offers is flimsy...a fake and a fraud. It will not last. It won't sustain you in difficult times. Worldly peace is about the absence of difficulty; the peace God gives us through Jesus is peace in the midst of the difficulty.

Jesus makes a way – a road as these verses started with – that is safe from actual harm, even if it travels through the valley of the shadow of death. In fact, he is the road. He is the way, as he himself says. He is the way and he makes the way forward for us. He orders our steps. He gives us this real peace. And I pray this peace would be yours right now this Christmas, in 2024, and beyond...along with the other gifts God gives us: hope, love, and joy. They are the best gifts you can receive, they come to you from the one who created you in his image, and they're yours when you come to Jesus with praise on your lips, and put your faith in him. Let's pray...Amen.