

*The Fifth Gospel:
Devotions on Isaiah*



FOR

UNTO US

A CHILD IS BORN

unto us

a son is given

and the government

shall be upon his shoulder

AND HIS NAME

SHALL BE CALLED

WONDERFUL COUNSELLOR

THE MIGHTY GOD

THE EVERLASTING FATHER

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

ISAIAH 9:6

Advent 2020

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Preface

Before there were the Gospels, the Letters, and the Revelation, the people of God had the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Isaiah is preeminent among the prophets both for the number of references in the New Testament, 55, but also for its soaring poetry. Isaiah's majestic verse has been described as if descending from the Throne Room of Heaven itself while lifting readers into God's very presence. It is not surprising the composer Handel chose Isaiah as his muse for *The Messiah*, nor that Isaiah is known as *The Fifth Gospel*.

Isaiah lived in tumultuous times. First in the 8th century BCE (chapters 1-39) during the rise of the Assyrian Empire, then in the 6th century BCE (chapters 40-55) when the School of Isaiah, (those prophets who continued his work in his name), spoke from the spiritual and physical geography of the Babylonian Exile, and finally in the 5th century BCE and beyond (chapters 56-66) during what is known as the post-exilic period after their return to Judah. Scholars designate these eras "First Isaiah," "Second (or Deutero) Isaiah," and "Third (or Trito) Isaiah." (The author will use Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah, c.f. 8:16 for a reference to the "School" of Isaiah.)

Isaiah wrote as Assyria, the Great Empire, rose to power and threatened Israel, the northern kingdom. Second Isaiah wrote after Babylon, the next Great Empire, had conquered Judah, the southern kingdom, and taken them into exile. Third Isaiah wrote after the exiles returned but in the shadow of Alexander's Greece, yet another Great Empire. As tumultuous as our era feels, our society is rather calm when compared to the times in which Isaiah, and the prophets who followed in his name, wrote.

This Advent devotional introduces you to Isaiah as Jesus read it—to its beauty, its lyrical poetry, its social challenge, and its spiritual hope. As Matthew or John shape and form our faith and Christian identity, so Isaiah helped form Jesus.

Not every reading from Isaiah fits neatly into an Advent theme, and I will not try to force a connection that is not present. When possible, however, I will point to the Gospel as it can be seen on Isaiah's horizon, to show how the life Jesus lived in the first century sprang from the fertile soil of a people who had long wrestled with God and each other, until Messiah could be born into this world.

This devotional is probably not for people who prefer "Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul." But if you want to see faith through the lens of one of Jesus' spiritual mentors, this devotional will start a journey where you will encounter Isaiah's spiritual passion and poetic genius, encounter Jesus anew, and, perhaps, hear him call you to a deeper faithfulness.

December 1

Isaiah 2:1-4

He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Isaiah's prophecies were uttered in what must have seemed like the twilight of Israelite history—two centuries beyond David's conquests and Solomon's Temple—with the shadow of the Assyrian Empire ever expanding—it's armies marauding the nations to the west and south, with Israel next in the crosshairs. I imagine Isaiah's friends and neighbors were concerned about their safety; conversations about military spending circling their dinner tables; maybe even a prayer or two to Yahweh. Isaiah, however, seemed less concerned about Assyria.

Isaiah's eyes were on the Lord.

Isaiah saw Israel's twilight not as a military problem but a spiritual one. For Isaiah, Israel needed to learn about trust—the kind of trust put into action, where swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. That such counsel was received as folly by Isaiah's contemporaries is a matter of history; whether Isaiah intended his counsel to be taken literally a matter for debate. Beyond debate is that Isaiah viewed Israel as having a spiritual problem that was also a social problem.

Isaiah knew the day would come—and the day was desperately needed—when "Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.'" For Isaiah, learning the ways of the God of Jacob was needed; learning to walk in God's path was the way forward, the way out, for Israel. While the nation searched for safety, Isaiah offered hope.

But hope in an unexpected place, from an unlikely source, is not often welcomed. Such is the journey of Advent. Advent is the time when we renew our willingness to open ourselves to the unexpected and welcome the unlikely.

Can anything good come from Galilee?

Prayer: God of Hope, open my mind to your possibilities, my heart to your promises, my hands to your people. Teach me your ways and to walk in your paths—grant me your hope.

December 2

Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

Jesus described Israel as a vineyard in his parables and teaching. In Luke 20, Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants who despoiled the vineyard. This parable was understood as spoken against the priests and scribes. In John 15, Jesus used vineyard imagery to convey the relationship between our connection to him and our ability to bear the fruit of God's kingdom. Jesus learned about vineyard imagery from Isaiah.

Often forgotten, or at least neglected, is the notion that Vineyard Israel is God's Beloved. Even as Isaiah spoke a prophetic word, Israel's status as Beloved was never in question. And Isaiah did speak a word against Israel:

...you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone... (5:8)

...you who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink, who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine... (5:11)

...you who call evil good and good evil...who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of their rights! (5:20)

Isaiah spoke this strong word against Israel because "The LORD of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness," but, also, because Israel is God's Beloved and the way Israel lived mattered.

Advent is as much a time of reckoning as it is reflection. We do not always notice the reckoning portion of Advent, as we are focused on lights and gifts and carols, all of which swath a joyous veneer upon the Season. Yet, as Advent is about the coming of God into the world, we are careless with Scripture if we neglect Advent's warning: We also are God's Beloved and, therefore, justice is expected and righteousness called forth from us.

Prayer: God of Justice, open my eyes to see my own brokenness and how I contribute to the brokenness of my community. Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy! Lord, have mercy!

December 3

Isaiah 6:1-13

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Advent's promise is that, if we pay attention, we'll glimpse God. The angels declare, the shepherds come to see, and the Star points to the glory of God! But have you ever imagined what that moment might be like? Isaiah actually saw God's glory, in a mystical vision, and it was almost his undoing.

Isaiah 6 plays a role similar to the role John the Baptizer plays in the Advent narratives. John was always barking a warning about something: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance." (Matthew 3:7-8) John's role in the Gospels was to caution God's people to take the message seriously; his was a warning not to walk too casually into God's neighborhood.¹ Isaiah delivered a similar word:

Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed...Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate....

Jesus quoted Isaiah 6 when asked why he spoke in parables. Both Isaiah and Jesus beg the question: "For heaven's sake, why on earth might God want people not to hear, not to see, and to be dull?" Well, for heaven's sake, actually, and our own.

Isaiah 6 and John the Baptizer show our need for repentance, exposing the dark under belly of our pride, our greed, our sloth. Both Isaiah and John understood that until we are able to accept that we have a problem, we will never be open to receiving the healing God offers: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

God's glory comes with forgiveness. Being able to hear what angels declare, to worship as shepherds worshipped, to see to whom the Star points is not easy, nor for the faint of heart. Beware!

Prayer: Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah! Grant me courage, grant me wisdom, for the facing of this hour! For the facing of this hour.

December 4

Isaiah 7:10-14

Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.

Before Mary faced a choice, Ahaz faced one, too. Ahaz, king of the southern kingdom of Judah, was surrounded by hostile nations to his north, by Syria (King Rezin) and Israel (King Pekah). In his fear, Ahaz made a pact with Assyria, the great power even farther north, whose armies were laying waste to the entire region. Ahaz adopted “the abominable practices of the nations” and replicated in the Temple the Assyrian altar “in exact detail.” (2 Kings 16) Fear often leads to poor choices.

In response to Ahaz’ fear, Isaiah uttered a prophecy about a young woman with child, a virgin birth. Some quibble the Hebrew word means “maiden” or “young woman,” not “virgin.” I wonder, “How many maidens were hooking up in Israel 2,800 years ago?” Linguistically, the quibble is legitimate; culturally not so much. The prophecy makes sense only as an act of the Lord. Fear often leads to poor choices, and the biblical antidote to fear is faith.

Isaiah’s prophecy invited Ahaz to put his trust in the Lord rather than Assyrian might. Only then, once the step of faith was taken, could Ahaz have discovered Immanuel. Immanuel is a combination of three Hebrew words whose literal meaning is “with-us-God.” To discover the “with-us-God” requires the ability to look at a pregnant maiden and see a virgin, to look at our challenges and see God’s opportunities, to look at the apparent absence of divine help and see Immanuel. Ahaz was unwilling and unable to see Immanuel, for his fear dominated him.

Mary’s story was different, which leads me to wonder. Was it that she was young and didn’t know enough to be afraid? Was it that she was poor, without political power or economic privilege? Was it that she was a maiden in an era of intense patriarchy? Is it easier to have faith when you have less to lose? Whatever the reason, Mary rejected fear and said yes to faith. And in doing so, Mary bore into the world the “with-us-God.”

Prayer: Immanuel, invite me into a life of faith by helping me let go of my fear. Open me, through faith, to seeing you, the “with-us-God.”

December 5

Isaiah 8:11-15

He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over—a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

In these still early words of Isaiah, the tone remains dour, and we don’t particularly like dour in our culture. Isaiah spoke of traps and snares when we prefer to talk about opportunities and possibilities. Isaiah spoke of stumbling blocks when we want to know how to get our churches moving forward. Isaiah spoke of fear and dread.

As it happens, I am Scottish, and the family crest of Clan Munroe is “Dread God.” My non-seminary trained family members have asked me about our crest, and I talk to them about how the word “fear” in Hebrew has a connotation of “awe,” about how God’s majesty is so great we cannot help but be overwhelmed. I try to make the fear (or dread) of the Lord sound less intimidating. I suspect Isaiah would object.

Isaiah was only comfortable with truth, and the truth was that Judah was a hot mess. Corruption and oppression were lovers, while greed and injustice routinely made back alley deals aimed at harming the poor. In such a society, fear and dread should not be made to sound less intimidating. Nor should the warning be sugar-coated: both the House of Israel (the northern kingdom) and the House of Judah (the southern kingdom) would fall. No one continues to walk who strikes their foot against the stone.

Jesus took Isaiah’s metaphor about a stone and said he himself was the stone that would cause people to stumble. (Matthew 21), and, indeed, people stumbled over him: looking like a peasant, coming from the backwaters of the nation, yet speaking like a rabbi and, even more, as if he thought he was Messiah. Jesus sounded like a revolutionary to some, like a sage to others, and acted as if the presence of God dwelled within him and through him. Yes, indeed, Jesus was a bit much for some people.

Advent invites us to take stock of our lives. Advent, a Season of Joy, invites us to do dour, to do dread. And so Advent invites us to truth, to name those places in our society where corruption and oppression are lovers and where greed and justice make back alley deals. Will we stumble or will we walk?

Prayer: Immanuel, open me to the truth and teach me to walk in the light. May I never stumble over Jesus, the Rock of my salvation.

December 6

Isaiah 9:1-11

Nevertheless, the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined...For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

“Nevertheless” is a powerful word. Piercing the gloom of Isaiah’s early chapters, “Nevertheless” marks a transition toward hope. The dread from Assyria’s armies grew ever darker; nevertheless, the Lord was still God. The greed and corruption in Israel continued unrelentingly; nevertheless, Israel remained God’s beloved.

In the midst of our darkest times it is easy to wonder about God’s promises, as if God’s presence or provision are empty. Injustice seems rampant, common sense reforms mere whispers in a world of shouting, our beloved continues toward death: How long, O Lord, will you forget us? Nevertheless, “there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.” Nevertheless, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” Nevertheless, God showed up—in the form of a child.

The promise of a child, a son, meant something different to Isaiah than to us.² For Isaiah, the promise referred to God’s Anointed, a Chosen Instrument, one through whom the nation would rally, rise up, be rescued. We hear this promise through the filter of the Gospel as penetrating deeper and farther, to refer to all humanity and not just Israel alone. We hear this promise through Trinitarian faith as expanding even into the sinews that hold the cosmos together. We hear this promise and trust that it refers to Jesus.

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace are job descriptions: the God of Wonders fully present, powerful and mighty, the father of eternity,³ the Anointed who brings God’s *shalom*. Isaiah’s hope is the Lord would send an Anointed, the Chosen One, God’s own son, to meet Israel in its moment of deepest darkness. Our same hope is encountered when we encounter Jesus who, in moments of our deepest need, is God’s “Nevertheless.”

For your prayer today, google “Handel, Unto us a Child is Born” and then listen to one of the YouTube performances that display.

December 7

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

A shoot and a root. Isaiah 11, one of the texts most profoundly connected with Advent, begins and ends with the shoot and root of Jesse, David’s father, the great ancestor of Jesus: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...” and, “On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples.” The imagery reminds us that God’s salvation is a family affair.

God’s salvation runs through David’s family to all families, to your family and my family, to families stressed by economics, war or famine, to families broken by addiction, abuse, or social structures that extinguish hope. God’s salvation intends to touch all people and all places such that our relational web is strengthened through healing, by compassion, and for justice.

In between the shoot rising from the seemingly dead tree stump and the deep roots of David’s family tree extending to the nations, the dwelling Isaiah promises will be glorious, is a cascade of images promising God’s peace and the restoration of God’s righteousness for all families:

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth...They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

That God’s salvation runs through David’s family to all families is not yet apparent—only a shoot has risen from the stump of Jesse, the roots have yet to grow to their fullest capacity. So as Advent is a season when we prepare for the arrival of the baby Jesus, we must ask, “To what purpose?”

If Advent is merely preparation to lift candles and sing *Silent Night*, we miss the purpose for which Jesus was born into this world. The light we lift come Christmas Eve finds meaning in the life born into the world for the sake of your family and my family, and for all families still searching, yearning, hoping for God’s righteousness to be revealed as the waters cover the sea.

Prayer: Holy God, may I bring equity to others—fairness of means and result—and look upon the poor through the eyes of Jesus. May peace be known to me and through me to those I encounter today.

December 8

Isaiah 25:6-10

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

There's nothing better in life than a feast with friends. There's nothing worse than the loss of a beloved—friend or family. Isaiah's Gospel of Hope promises the one and proclaims the destruction of the other.

After Isaiah's words were written in the 8th century B.C.E., rabbis debated the meaning of his promise, especially the thrice-used word "all." If all peoples and all nations are a part of this promise, will Israel's enemies be present at the feast, too?

By Jesus' day in the 1st century C.E., the rabbis had developed a pecking order for those who will be present. The Gentiles would be at the feast but have to sit behind the Jewish families. The Gentiles would be present but as servants. The Gentiles would...well, you get the picture: God's chosen come first. Such a vision is not the joyful feast of the people of God.

The Church in the 21st century bears a strong resemblance to rabbinic attitudes in the 1st century. We are tempted to think, to feel, to say, and even to act upon a presumed pecking order: us and then others; we, God's chosen, come first. Jesus turns our presumption upside-down and inside-out with an even bolder promise: God's gifts are for all people, all nations. Even our enemies.

Remember the last time you had a feast of rich food and well-aged wines with friends. Remember the joy, the laughter, the light-hearted banter. Now imagine that same banter, that same laughter, that same joy, with those you currently call an enemy. This is the joyful feast of the people of God.

Remember the last time you gathered with loved ones to bear witness to the resurrection. Remember the sorrow, the tears, the softly spoken reminiscences. Now imagine a time when all relationships are present tense, where tears turn into laughter, with sorrow transformed into joy. This is the Advent hope to which Isaiah points. Let's *all* celebrate!

Prayer: God of Life and Love, turn my heart inside-out, and help me anticipate the joyful feast of the people of God even here, even now, even today.

December 9

Isaiah 28:14-19

I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: One who trusts will not panic. And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb....

Jesus had much to say about how to evaluate good from bad, truth from lie, light from dark. "A good tree will bear good fruit and a bad tree will bear bad fruit." "You will know the truth and the truth shall set you free." "If one blind person guides another, both will fall into the pit."⁴ Jesus learned these truths from Isaiah. For Isaiah, the measure for good from bad consisted of justice and righteousness—right relationships whose aim was fairness of process and result. Relationships, for Isaiah, created a plumb line.

Old School masons used a string on a nail to detect a 90-degree angle, the laws of gravity showing them up from down. Justice and righteousness are God's plumb line, which tells good from bad, truth from lie, light from dark. Does an act lead to wellness and wholeness for the entire community? Does a decision lead to healing and health in relationships? Are the least, last and lost among our citizenry cared for with compassion, mercy, and kindness?

Jesus also had something to say about building strong foundations. "A wise builder builds the house on the rock." "Intending to build a tower, does not the builder first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?"⁵ Again, Jesus, the Messiah, learned from Isaiah, the Mentor. For Isaiah, a good foundation is tested and sure, even precious, and creates assurance: "One who trusts will not panic."

On what are you building your life? Is your well-being crushed without financial or vocational successes? On what have you built your faith? Is your trust in God cratered if you must bear a cross? Or is your life and faith built upon the sure and certain hope that God's desire for you, and for all, is right relationships? Can you trust that God desires communities and nations built upon fairness of process and result?

What plumb line do you use to evaluate how the laws of spiritual gravity guide you toward up from down? Advent is a time to remember, a time of preparation, a time to recommit: Jesus is our plumb line.

Prayer: Just and Merciful God, teach me anew to commit my life to loving you by serving others. Empower me to be the hands and feet of Good News.

December 10

Isaiah 29:11-16

The Lord said: "Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so...the wisdom of their wise shall perish...."

We hear a lot about "Fake News," which often seems to be defined as "that which my side doesn't like." Perhaps I overstate the situation, but it appears our country is mired in confirmation bias—we believe what we are already predisposed to believe, act upon it, and woe to anyone who stands in our way. Isaiah encountered a similar situation.

Power politics in Isaiah's days were dominated by the Assyrians: Terrors from the North. Should the king build up the army or craft a treaty? If the latter, with whom: Assyria or the lesser nations who were Israel's neighbors? What would a "wise" ruler choose?

One would expect for Israel to have sought the Lord's counsel, but this was exactly where the rulers and people of Isaiah's day failed. Oh, they sought the Lord's counsel, but in name only: they said all the right things, used the religiously approved script, the obedience they had learned as children, what some call learning that is "by heart" but which is really by rote.

There is a difference between learning by rote and learning by heart. Rote is knowing the words; heart is knowing what the words mean. Rote is saying all the right things; heart is saying the right things as a covenant, as an act of honor. Rote uses the ancient liturgy handed down from age to age; heart allows the ancient liturgy to invite, to guide, to direct all that one does. Israel heard, knew, and understood the Lord's counsel, but they did not like what they heard. For them it was Fake News.

Jesus quoted this portion of Isaiah in his arguments with those who thought of themselves as religious leaders.⁶ Jesus' critique was this: they knew the form but not the substance of true faith, and so their wisdom perished. The Season of Advent forces us to remember and recite the ancient liturgy of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Advent reminds us we know the story by rote; it invites us to live it by heart.

Prayer: Sofia God, whose wisdom is the fount of all true understanding, keep us wise in word and deed, in attitude and action, all for your honor and the well-being of those for whom you sent your Son into the world.

December 11

Isaiah 35:5-10

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert... A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way....

John the Baptizer was a man of conviction: a strong preacher and fierce prophet, he brooked no fools and had zero tolerance for nonsense. The depiction of John in the Gospels is a bit scary, frankly, and it's more than just that he ate locusts and wild honey—how *did* he gather the wild honey? But even people of conviction, even if they live strong and fierce, can have their doubts.

John's doubts arose at his lowest moment, where he sat in prison, his movement seemingly defeated, his life dangled by a thread. The thread was held by a maniacal and cruel seamstress: Herod. John knew the designs of Herod's heart, and it created doubt within him. In the dusk and gloom, John sent messengers to his cousin, Jesus, to ask if he was the Messiah (Matthew 11).

Most readers of the Gospel assume John already believed this to be true about Jesus. Earlier in the Gospel, John believed his cousin was Messiah, but the evidence had become foggy. Doubt often emerges in the midst of dusk and gloom and fog.

The messengers from John asked Jesus, "Are you the one or should we wait for another?" Jesus answered them with Isaiah:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Isaiah is the guarantor of Jesus' Messianic credentials. Jesus was doing what Isaiah foretold God's Anointed would do. Jesus didn't answer with a simple, "Yes." Instead, he answered with his walk, describing the Holy Way; where rain falls in the desert, light shines in the darkness, and God shows up in our lowest moments.

Prayer: God of the Desert, who sends rain upon just and unjust alike, refresh me with your Spirit that I may walk the Way of Jesus today.

December 12

Isaiah 40:1-8, 27-31

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God... A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God..." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" ...The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Second Isaiah, writing two centuries beyond the original prophet yet in his name, began with a message of comfort. The exiles from Judah, the Southern kingdom, needed comfort. They had been in Babylon for several decades with no hope of return in sight. They were stuck in a foreign land, surrounded by foreign gods, the Lord's Temple destroyed, and the Lord seemingly absent.

Spiritual writers talk about the absence of God as a time of wilderness, dryness, dark nights followed by scorching heat that creates a thirst that cannot be quenched. Second Isaiah knew the absence of God had overwhelmed the exiles from Judah. He was aware of their desperation. Into their dryness he spoke words like the coming of a monsoon:⁷ "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!" In other words, get ready! God is a coming!! It won't be long now!!!

For the exiles to believe the Lord would restore them to the Land must have seen a bit fabulous. The tales of God's mighty acts might have seemed to the exiles as no more than fables told them by their grandmothers and grandfathers. It had been generations and the promise of God's presence remained unfulfilled. None of the exiles had seen the Lord's outstretched hand at work; no one alive could bear witness. Yet Second Isaiah is bold to witness, and he pointed to God's Word.

Advent begins with Second Isaiah's comfort, continues with John's wilderness warnings, but it stands upon God's Word, which stands forever. The rehearsal of the Advent stories may seem like mere fables; the God to which they point may appear absent to some. Yet we read, recite and remember the stories nevertheless because we trust our experience of God's absence is only for a time not for eternity. The grass will wither come summer, the flowers will fade, yet we will continue to read, to recite, to remember.

Prayer: Eternal God, help me to stand in faith, trusting you; stand in prayer, seeking you; stand in service, loving others in your name.

December 13

Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

Isaiah 42 is the first of four "Servant Songs" in Second Isaiah. Scholars argue about the identity of the Servant. The best guess is that the Servant refers to the nation of Israel or King Cyrus of Persia.⁸ Scholars deny the Servant refers to Jesus; how could it? After all, Jesus was still six centuries from being born!

And yet....

Jesus, with Second Isaiah as one of his mentors, lived into fulfillment of the role laid out for God's Anointed.

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. (Luke 4:18)

The most compelling sign that Jesus was Second Isaiah's Servant is Jesus' relationship with "bruised reeds" and "dimly burning wicks"—those broken by life's hardships: Mary Magdalene, the bearer of seven demons, an anonymous woman who had bled for 12 years, an ornery "invalid," to use the description in the NRSV, who had waited 39 years for someone, anyone, to lift a finger to help him.

Advent, a season of hope, calls us to renewal. Most of us are neither bruised reeds nor dimly burning wicks, in general, yet all of us are these things occasionally. When the occasion comes, and life overwhelms us, it is more than the Lord whose soul delights in the Servant—our souls, also, delight that our Savior is God's Servant.

My soul delights that Jesus, who was fierce enough to turn tables and clear the Temple courts with a whip, is yet gentle enough to heal my heart, to lift my eyes, to help me trust again and, oh, so much more.

In whom does your soul delight?

Prayer: Divine Master, may I not snuff out the smoldering wick but reignite the flames of justice, to fear brokenness as to be transformed by it, to shout, "Crucify!" as to pray at the foot of the Cross.

December 14

Isaiah 45:5-7, 21-23

There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other...To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.

As I read Isaiah 45, I am reminded of the faux controversy surrounding “Merry Christmas” versus “Happy Holidays.” The argument aligns with our culture wars and seems to suggest “real” believers are either unashamed to say the word Christmas or sensitive enough to say the word Holidays. Like all faux controversies, I find this one tiresome.

And yet Isaiah 45 points to real questions: is the Lord the only god or are there others? Are the gods of other religions different or the same as the Lord? What are we to make of religious exclusivism versus inclusivity? What should “real” believers say? This is a controversy I find interesting.

Isaiah 45 is the culmination of monotheistic evolution in the Bible: from (a) many gods *and* the Lord is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to (b) many gods but the Lord is the God *above* other gods, to (c) “I am God, and there is *no other*.” Isaiah 45 proclaims the triumph of monotheism but does not end the controversy. “Real” believers are still left with questions: Is Allah just the Arabic name for the Lord? Are the Hindu gods a metaphorical means of speaking of the divine attributes of Yahweh?

Into this never-ending back and forth of theological digression, Isaiah 45 interjects a helpful notion: humility. Isaiah 45 reminds us that, at some point in history, “every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear (confess).” These words presage the early Christian hymn recited by Paul in Philippians 2:5-11, which quotes Isaiah 45. Significant in this early hymn are these words: “[Christ] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited but emptied himself...humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death.”

The triumph of monotheism is conveyed through the lens of God’s humility. Perhaps this Advent we can try something different: proclaim the triumph of Jesus without triumphalism; confess Jesus not with raised voice (nor raised fist!) but on bended knee.

Prayer: Holy One, I bow. Eternal One, I obey. Gracious One, I am thankful—may I bear the light of your love to all whom I meet.

December 15

Isaiah 49:1-7

The Lord says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Who is worthy of inclusion in God’s Kin-dom? What holiness is required of God’s people? Are you “in” or are you “out”? Such questions shaped the centuries prior to Jesus’ birth. Gentile inclusion vs. exclusion was *the* debate that shaped 1st century Israel and Second Isaiah took a side.⁹

Speaking in favor of Gentile exclusion are such scriptures as Ezra, with its prohibition against anyone of “half-blood” remaining in Jerusalem, and Nehemiah, with the call to rebuild the wall to keep the Gentiles out, and Esther, with its sub-text that, if Israelites were not careful, the Gentiles would attempt genocide against them.

Speaking in favor of Gentile inclusion are such books as Ruth, who conveys that King David’s grandfather was himself a foreigner and not of pure, Israelite blood; Jonah, with its message of mercy toward Israel’s most bitter enemy; and Second Isaiah: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

The debate continues today in the Christian Church as we wrestle with how best to maintain ethical integrity in a moral landscape approximating the Wild, Wild West. We wrestle with how to convey spiritual grace in a world where people think they already know what Jesus is about (but don’t, really) or are only willing to accept the grace we offer if it remains unattached to the name of Jesus. How are we supposed to share the Good News of Jesus without any reference to Jesus, the Bible, or the Church? I am frustrated! Sharing light, life and love shouldn’t be so difficult!

And yet, I find comfort in the knowledge that Jesus also took a side in this debate. His heart and mind turned outward, always, to everyone, whoever stood before him, without exception. I may not always get it right, but I always know with whom to stand.

Prayer: Divine Master, make me an instrument of your peace, a vessel of your grace to convey your mercy—your light, life and love to all!

December 16

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan; Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone. Snow had fallen, snow on snow on snow. In the bleak midwinter long ago.

The poet Christina Rossetti penned a poem that Gustav Holz set to music that has become a favorite Advent hymn: *In the Bleak Midwinter*. Second Isaiah would approve of this hymn, I suspect. The prophet knew what it felt like to live amidst a people mired in despair.

The setting of Second Isaiah is Judah's exile and, therefore, the subjugation of a people. They longed for freedom from despair: We are without power and the Lord has abandoned us! Into this death spiral, Second Isaiah speaks an outlandish, outrageous, preposterous word: "...say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" Despite all evidence to the contrary, Second Isaiah proclaims the victory of God.

I am reminded of preachers with similar audacity.¹⁰ Tony Campolo: "It's Friday and all the people are weeping, but Sunday's a coming." Tom Long: "At a funeral Death plants its victory flag and says, 'Gather round,' and all the evidence seems to be on its side: the casket, the body, the absence of our beloved. And the Easter message says to Death, 'Not so fast.'" What does it look like to live with audacity when confronted by those with all the evidence on their side? Second Isaiah is bold to suggest: "...bring good news...proclaim peace...bring good tidings...proclaim salvation." Amen!

In the Bleak Midwinter ends with a similar audacity. Following all the reasons the Advent of Messiah came at an inopportune time, it concludes:

What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what I can I give Him, I give Him my heart.

Prayer: God of Hope, I give you my heart—use me to shine light into bleak places, to offer hope, for you are the God who reigns!

December 17

Isaiah 53:1-12

Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

The Cradle leads to the Cross. The messages of Christmas and Easter are organically linked. The message of Christmas is God loves us and is willing to break the power of sin and death. The message of Easter is God loves us and is able to break the power of sin and death. And it is the Cross that is the bridge between Christmas and Easter.

I once thought it a clever idea to introduce Good Friday themes into the Christmas Eve liturgy. Instead of a faux baby Jesus in the wooden manger we placed in front of the communion table, I placed a large, bronze cross, swaddled, of course, in blankets. Along with *Joy to the World* we also sang *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*. And though we sang the traditional lyrics to *Silent Night*, to the same tune we also sang lyrics I wrote for the Good Friday themed hymn *Silent Day*.¹¹ It was a right and proper liturgical mess.

What was fascinating to me was how my experiment in creative liturgy served as a kind of Rorschach Test. The first parishioner to exit the sanctuary said to me, "Thank you for ruining Christmas." Our oldest parishioner said, "That was the most meaningful service I've ever attended." Are you able to accept the same baby Jesus who lay in a manger will one day cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Second Isaiah's final Servant Song is also the most famous, called the Suffering Servant. While Second Isaiah could not have known about Jesus' life to come, he discerned the Gospel hope about redemptive suffering, about the healing power of taking upon oneself the sin and sorrow and brokenness of others. That it is God who so suffers is both the scandal and the splendor of the Christian faith. As Jurgen Moltmann wrote, "...*this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than Jesus is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity."¹² In Advent, we remember the Cross begins in the Cradle.

Prayer: Suffering God, who bears the sin of the world in your own being, becoming what we cannot bear, thank you! Praise you! Thank you!

December 18

Isaiah 55:1-13

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?... "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.

Second Isaiah ends with grace. More precisely, it ends with an invitation to dine at the Lord's table of grace. It is an invitation to the thirsty, the hungry, the poor—an invitation not merely to sustenance but to feasting.

The logic of grace is difficult for many people to embrace, and Second Isaiah understood this truth. The prophet countered the argument he knew to be coming in response to God's gracious invitation: "But if we offer something for nothing, people will take advantage!" Against such objections, Second Isaiah quoted the Lord God Almighty to remind his readers of their short-sightedness:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Grace is not transactional. The people who object to the Lord's open invitation to feasting lament that grace might lead to manipulation of the system, to freeloading. Such an objection is classist and racist, a faulty premise that requires an exchange of goods and services for all situations.

Grace is transformational. The people who receive and welcome the Lord's open invitation to feasting celebrate this: grace fashions God's new creation *ex nihilo*.¹³ Second Isaiah understood the power behind grace was the action of God working to transform:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud...so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Advent is preparation to welcome God's grace. Jesus is coming into the world—to dwell among us, teach us how to be and become, to die for us and to be raised from the dead. There is no price you or I can pay for this gift except to welcome it.

Prayer: God of Grace, open my heart to welcome your love both for me and for others and for all. Gracious God transform my mind that your thoughts might become my thoughts and your ways might become my ways.

December 19

Isaiah 56:4-8

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant... I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever... And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants... these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.

Third Isaiah begins with the fierce debate that would find its way into Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees and continue even into today's Christian controversies: Who is "in" and who is "out"? What are God's people to do with folks who do not look, think, speak, or act in ways we find familiar?¹⁴

Deuteronomy 23:1-3 expressly forbids eunuchs and foreigners from entering the assembly of the Lord, yet Third Isaiah quotes the Lord as welcoming eunuchs and foreigners of good conscience and faithful obedience, even giving them an "everlasting name that will endure forever" and promising to "give them joy in my house of prayer."

Jesus, citing this passage from Third Isaiah, whips the money changers and chases them from the Temple (c.f. Matthew 21:13 and John 2:15). Immediately following Jesus' actions, the blind and lame come to him at the Temple, in direct contravention of Leviticus 21:18 which forbids the blind and lame from being in the Temple courts. Evidently, the blind and lame saw in Jesus' actions a holy freedom, a new Way of discerning Truth that promised them Life.¹⁵

The centuries-long, post-exilic debate was predicated on powerful arguments from both sides. Those in favor of a closed circle looked warily to Solomon and his 700 foreign wives and the way it opened both king and culture to idolatry¹⁶—only ritual purity would save Israel. Those in favor of an open circle looked further back, to the covenant the Lord made with Abraham: to give him a land, make him the father of a people, and bless the world through him.¹⁷ To the latter, Israel had welcomed the first two gifts but forgotten the third part of the covenant—the obligation to be a blessing to the world.

We are blessed to be a blessing. It was the consistent message of Isaiah, whether the original prophet or those who continued his work in his name. We are blessed to be a blessing. It was the message of Jesus. We are blessed to be a blessing. Is it the message conveyed by your life and the life of your church?

Prayer: Divine Master, make me an instrument of your peace, blessed to be a blessing, forgiven and so forgiving, having been welcomed into the rule of your Sovereign love and so welcoming others—indeed, welcoming all.

December 20

Isaiah 58:1-12

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a people to humble themselves? ...Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice...to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter and when you see the naked to clothe them?

During Advent, it is easy to get lost in the details of church ritual. Are the purple candles burned down too far? When do we light the “rose” candle? Should we avoid singing Christmas carols until after December 24, or is it okay to introduce a carol or two before the Christmas Eve service? These and a hundred other rituals make the Advent season a delight as well as a danger. Third Isaiah cautions us about the danger of ritual.

In Isaiah 58, the prophet waded into the waters of Israel’s post-exilic spiritual debate regarding what constituted proper devotion:¹⁸ Was it scrupulosity to the letter of ritual purity and cultic devotion, or was there a wider lens and deeper purpose for Israel’s existence? What will keep Israel right with the Lord?

Third Isaiah scoffed at the notion of ritual purity as being important and mocked the idea that cultic devotion alone has transformative power: “Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?” In the place of ritual, Third Isaiah reminded Israel of the Lord’s call to righteousness. Instead of rules for the right worship of God, he articulated requirements for the right love of neighbor:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice...to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter, and when you see the naked to clothe them?

Isaiah 58 sounds remarkably similar to Matthew 25:31-38, in which Jesus speaks the parable of the sheep and goats:

Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink...And when did we see you naked and clothe you? ...As you have done to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done to me.

Don’t get me wrong: I am all for lighting the Advent wreath in December, and I love singing both *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* and *Joy to the World*, but some things are an even greater priority. For Jesus, as well as for his mentor Isaiah, how we live in the world and how we create a culture of care for the least of our brothers and sisters is the measure of our faithfulness.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me what it means to loose the chains of injustice. Give me eyes wide open to see and a heart open wide to love those for whom justice is denied.

December 21

Isaiah 59:1-21

His own arm achieved salvation...his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes....

Isaiah 59 is Third Isaiah’s Normandy invasion of our conscience—D-Day has come and will not be denied:

No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil. They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider’s web. (59:4-5)

Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like people without eyes. (59:9-10)

Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene.... (59:15-16)

With the original Isaiah, we might rightly cry out, “Woe is me! I am undone, for I am a person of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips!”

Third Isaiah forces a reckoning: What is the purpose for which Jesus came into the world? Surely some will answer, “Jesus came to save!” And that answer is correct but begs further questions: From what and for what and for whom?

The Reformed faith answers these questions thusly: Jesus came to save all people from the power and dominion of sin, to free us from sin’s guilt and consequences, and to free us for service in the world, to be partners with God in bringing *shalom* on earth as it is in heaven. The Reformed faith’s answer to Isaiah’s challenge is to confess sin, seek grace, and share love.

Third Isaiah concludes, “His own arm achieved salvation,” yet we can hardly call this an act of grace, for Third Isaiah continues with what sounds like a discordant chord, “...so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes.”

The reckoning Third Isaiah envisioned was transformed in the person, teaching and life of Jesus into a new song. What Third Isaiah envisioned for others Jesus took upon himself; what others could not bear Jesus bore for our sake—and the student became the Master.

Prayer: Lord have mercy! Christ have mercy! Lord have mercy upon us!

December 22

Isaiah 60:1-7, 18-21

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isaiah 60 moves us beyond Advent and into the season of Christmas. We hear echoes of Isaiah 60 in Matthew and John:

Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:1-2)

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:5, 14)

Third Isaiah pleads the case of “the peoples” (Hebrew: *goyyim*). Third Isaiah’s concern is neither the northern kingdom of Israel nor the southern kingdom of Judah, but “the peoples.” Darkness shall “cover” not merely the land we associate with Palestine; indeed, “thick darkness is over the peoples.” But there is hope, for the “Nations (*goyyim*) will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

That the Gospel is intended to extend to the four corners of the Earth is axiomatic for Christian faith and is embedded in the Christmas narratives. The magi come from far away, from the east; they are Gentiles and yet believers. They seek a king not of their own kingdom and worship an infant unknown to them except as a revelation in the stars.

I fear the modern church worries too much about our scarcity; what I call the 3-Bs: Butts, Bucks and Bricks. We feel we need more butts in the pews to get more bucks in the plates to care for the bricks falling into the parking lot. Third Isaiah has a corrective for such spiritual myopia: trust God’s provision and remember our calling. Rather than the 3-Bs, Third Isaiah’s prescription is to shine light.

We shine light as we care for those caught in the clutches of systemic poverty. We shine light as we advocate for laws that break the bondage of systemic poverty. We shine light whenever and however we seek God’s *shalom*—wellness of heart and mind, wholeness of body and spirit—for those who are different from us, whom we might dismiss as merely “the peoples” but who, Third Isaiah tells us, are God’s concern.

Prayer: God of the Nations, grant that I may learn the heartache and heartbreak of those caught in systemic poverty. Shine, Jesus, shine, upon them and upon us all.

December 23

Isaiah 61:1-7

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God....

Something is amiss. The student has become the Master, again. Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 in the beginning of his ministry, as told by Luke, in what scholars call Jesus’ “programmatic speech,” which is a fancy way of saying Jesus’ mission statement. (Luke 4:18-19) The vision for ministry first laid out by Third Isaiah is adopted, phrase for phrase, by Jesus, showing the extent to which the Book of Isaiah served as Jesus’ mentor. But suddenly Jesus changes the script. Do you see the difference?

Jesus stopped Third Isaiah’s quote after “the Lord’s favor,” thus omitting “and the day of vengeance of our God....” I wonder about this omission. Is it because Jesus didn’t believe in God’s vengeance? Because he wanted to accentuate the positive and not sound like a curmudgeon? Because God is no longer angry over sin? Because, because...I really don’t know.

What I do know is Jesus is Lord and gave himself permission to exhibit his lordship over Scripture itself by making a significant change to Third Isaiah’s meaning. I know Jesus prioritized some Scriptures over others, as when he prioritized compassion over Sabbath observance and mercy over purity.¹⁹

What I suspect, even if my suspicions cannot rise to the level of knowledge, is that Jesus understood God’s anger over sin would be poured out upon himself, who would willingly carry it. St. Paul says of Jesus’ sacrifice that it is the expiation of sin—the making amends for wrongdoing—and even goes so far as to make the outrageous claim that Jesus became “sin that we might become the righteousness of God.”²⁰

The ministry Jesus assumed did not focus on God’s vengeance. Instead, he declared good news: binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming freedom and release and Jubilee!²¹ The focus of ministry Third Isaiah put forth that Jesus affirmed as his own mission statement is the work of justice and joy, salvation and *shalom*—it is *Joy to the World* and *Gloria in excelsis Deo*—difficult, strenuous work, yes, but less concerned with God’s anger and more focused on God’s love.

Where is your focus as you proclaim Good News and bind up the brokenhearted?

Prayer: God of Mercy, may I celebrate with you when the poor are lifted up, the broken are healed and Good News is revealed in this world.

December 24

Isaiah 64:4-9

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him... We are the clay; you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.

“...Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2) These words from 1 John point to the horizon of Isaiah 64 and of Christmas: we are being made new; transformation is our destiny. “Into what?” is the question.

Paul quoted Third Isaiah in 1 Corinthians 2:9 in a section of his epistle in which the apostle made the case that God was doing a new thing by bringing Jews and Gentiles together as one, into a unity of humanity in which the Way of Jesus—what Paul called “the mind of Christ” (2:16)—creates a new kind of human and a new community in Jesus.

Third Isaiah pointed toward this action of God beyond our hearing and vision and said it was also beyond our imagination.²² Using the image of a potter molding clay to shape art and function, Third Isaiah promised the Lord’s mercy would first forgive and then form us into a people we do not expect to be.

What God intends, designs, and enacts is often unexpected and can come not only as a surprise but as a shock. We don’t see it until it is revealed. We may not believe it when we see it: God touching the heart we thought was closed. God breaking down the dividing wall of hostility between implacable enemies. God lifting as if on eagle’s wings those who are falling into the abyss. God healing a nation divided by anger, stuck in the miry clay of political malice.

Tonight we will read, recite and remember the story of Jesus’ birth. We will lift candles, sing *Silent Night* and perform the Christmas Eve liturgy as we have come to expect it. As we do, pray rote recitation of the liturgy doesn’t obscure the audacious claim of Christian faith: God is *Im-manu-el*, the with-us-God. Before this night, two millennia past, no ear had heard, no eye had seen, and no human heart had conceived of such a thing.²³ But the heart of God intended, designed, and enacted it.

Can we live as if we believe it?

Prayer: Glorious One, you are the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me into your new creation. Fashion within me the mind of Christ, the heart of Jesus, and make my hands part of your Body.

December 25

Isaiah 65:17-25

“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.

Third Isaiah’s penultimate chapter weaves together the warp and woof of Gospel hope: God creating new heavens and a new earth, former sorrows forgotten, prosperity breaking out in unexpected ways, peace breaking out in unexpected places. All this is a gift from God.

Third Isaiah is rarely recited at a Christmas Day service, which is a shame, for there is so much worthy of our contemplation:

Good Christian friends rejoice!²⁴

Never again will there be in Jerusalem an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years...

With hearts and hands and voice!

...the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child; the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.

Give ye heed to what we say!

They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat.

Jesus Christ was born today!

For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune....

Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!

The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.

Prayer: Child of Light, Son of Love, True God from True God, may your peace reign in my heart and radiate to all whom I meet today and into every tomorrow.

¹ The image of John the Baptizer as the Gospel's guard dog is taken from a sermon preached by Barbara Brown Taylor.

² Hebraic authors use "son" to refer to the king (c.f. Psalm 2:7) or other leaders, warriors, or prophets through whom God works. It is later, early Christian thinkers that begin to associate "son" with the second person of the Trinity.

³ "The father of eternity" is the literal translation of the Hebrew.

⁴ c.f. Matthew 7:18, John 8:32, and Matthew 15:14

⁵ c.f. Matthew 7:24 and Luke 14:29.

⁶ c.f. Matthew 15:7.

⁷ The author is from Arizona where "monsoon rains" are met with glee and, as in the concluding sentence of today's devotional, the knowledge that, come the summer months, the grass will wither and the flowers fade is not speculation but certainty.

⁸ Both have support (c.f. 44:1 and 45:1) and Isaiah seems comfortable with having multiple referents.

⁹ Israel's post-exilic (i.e. after the people returned from exile) debate might be compared to the way certain perennial debates in U.S. history (e.g. States' Rights vs. Federalism, limited vs. big government) have influenced our formation and the socio-political climate in our day.

¹⁰ The quotes that follow are the author's best approximations from sermons heard years ago. It is highly doubtful they are verbatim quotations.

¹¹ Silent Day, Holy Day! All is still, Heaven waits! Abba, Father, looks on with love, the Beloved without the Dove. Hanging from the tree, hanging from the tree.

Silent Day, Holy Day! Soldiers watch, women stay! Silence streams from heaven unbound Heavenly hosts weep at the sound Christ our Savior now dies, Christ our Savior now dies.

Silent Day, Holy Day! Son of God, love's pure way! Radiant beams from Thy holy face, With the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord, at Thy death, Jesus, Lord, at Thy death.

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 295.

¹³ *Ex nihilo* means "out of nothing" and is a term used by theologians to describe how God created the heavens and Earth.

¹⁴ c.f. December 16 and the devotional on Isaiah 49.

¹⁵ These verses remind us the Bible is more a library than a book, and different sections of biblical literature debate each other. Jesus understood this literary interaction of Scripture and seemed comfortable making choices to prefer one over the other. It is not that one Scripture was right and the other wrong but that one was given more priority, more "weight," because it led more assuredly to the love of God and neighbor.

¹⁶ c.f. 1 Kings 11:1-6

¹⁷ c.f. Genesis 12:2-3.

¹⁸ c.f. Leviticus for the laws guiding ritual purity and cultic devotion (i.e. worship rules).

¹⁹ c.f. Mark 3:1-6 and compare Luke 6:36 to Leviticus 19:2.

²⁰ c.f. Romans 3:25 and 2 Corinthians 5:21.

²¹ c.f. Leviticus 25:54.

²² I feel compelled to note this verse is cited out of context quite often when preachers talk about heaven, as at a funeral service. While I agree heaven is beyond and above our ability to imagine, the recitation of these phrases to bolster one's argument about heaven is misguided. Whether citing from Isaiah or Paul, citing these verses to describe heaven misses the context of personal and communal transformation leading to a new ethic, transformed quality of relationships, and just social structures because of the action of God upon the believer and community of believers in the here and now.

²³ I would be remiss if I did not point out that non-Jewish writers had imagined forms of deity on earth (e.g. Hercules) and that the more correct statement would be that no Jewish writer had conceived of God becoming human prior to Paul's letters and the Gospels, which, at the time, were Jewish literature.

²⁴ *Good Christian Friends Rejoice*, translated from Latin by John Mason Neale, 1853.