

Heaven Come Down II  
December 7, 2014  
Boone UMC; Jason Byassee

I had a conversation this week with Dana Davis, our music director. I absent-mindedly asked her, so what is the children's nativity *about* this year? Not sure what I was thinking. Dana looked at me funny and said "It's about the birth of Jesus." Oh, right. Same as last year. Good. Carry on. I tried to look confident as I left the room.

This is the second in our Advent series of sermons called "Heaven Comes Down." It is drawn from the book of Isaiah. The church has seen Christ so clearly in Isaiah, we sometimes call it the Fifth Gospel. All the hope possible in the world God pours into this prophet. Let me be honest. As a preacher I hope for maybe *one* good phrase in a biblical text, one thing to seize on to give you a little hope for your week. In these 11 verses from Isaiah *every single phrase* is pregnant with hope. As you hear this word, remember--Israel is devastated. She sits in Babylon where other gods are worshiped. Folks taunt her—maybe your god is too *weak* to help you. Others scream at her—you're here because you sinned, because God hates you. Isaiah says something different. Listen to the book you love.

Isaiah 40:1-11

*1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." 6 A voice says "Cry out!" and I said "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of the Lord will stand forever. 9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

When you're reading the bible pay special attention when something is said twice. Comfort, *comfort* my people, Isaiah says. "The grass withers, the flower fades," then I thought my eye had skipped, but no, it's there twice, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord stands forever." Third example, this passage has a version of "look here!" four different times. This is God waving his arms. Hey! Listen! Look! Pay attention! In older English the word would be "behold!" In our English it would be something like this, "look here y'all!" The prophet sees what we can't. And he promises it is good news from God for all people.

Three points today. One, the future. Two, the nature of our hope. Three, the character of God.

One, the future. George Steiner, Cambridge professor and literary critic, says that to speak in the future tense is to resist the power of death. Just to use words like *will* or *shall* is to say that life will have its way and death will not. Isaiah looks into the horizon and he sees *hope*. This is courageous. Most of Israel is beaten down and can't lift its head at all. When the prophet gets ready to speak, Israel flinches, please, no

more bad news, no more destruction, no more death, that's all we get. And instead Isaiah says this, comfort, comfort, God has tender words for you.

It is difficult to find hope. For example, in Japan, a society as consumeristic as ours but less religious, universities are trying to start a field called hope studies. They're wondering what gets people out of bed in the morning other than a bigger flat screen? And without religion they're having trouble coming up with an answer. A contemporary Scottish writer says this about Scotland, "without the bible its spirit is being starved and its imagination atrophied."<sup>i</sup> Don't feel superior! Think about our entertainment. It has a *bleak* view of the future. Zombies are coming. No its vampires. No wait it's environmental catastrophe. Nah, it's the Russians. Whatever. *Somebody is coming* to undo us. It's as though we've tried the options on hope and they all fail. Politics is a train wreck. Technology does make our lives better, but it also fills the world with junk—technology always over-promises and under-delivers. The church is often the worst at talking about hope. Preachers scream in the media that Obama is the antichrist or world war 3 is coming and they sound *happy* about it. Where's the hope?

Isaiah, *God's* prophet, says something different, so different I'm not sure we dare to believe it. Israel has suffered *enough*. Her penalty *is paid*. She will receive tender comfort now. God is coming. *Every* highway will be made straight, every mountain level, every valley lifted up, and God will fill the world with himself. *Heaven come down*: that's the church's hope in Advent and Christmas. Dare we believe it church? That we've seen the future and it all gets better?

Point two today, the *nature* of our hope, I've already picked on poor Japan and Scotland, on politics and technology, let's spread the love. I got to visit China some years ago and learn about the church's growth. The church in China is like the church in ancient Rome—the government doesn't approve, but millions follow Jesus—the government might be right to be afraid. I asked what was appealing about Christianity, and folks said this: Marxism has failed, it hasn't delivered good news to the poor like it promised. *Then* they said something interesting: Christianity has made the west great. And China wants to be great. So Christianity is their way to capitalism and power. And I said, uh, ok, that's idolatry. Power and capitalism are fine, that's not the problem. The problem is *using* Jesus to *get* something else—like power. And yes, Christianity is the way to be great, but not to be wealthy and powerful. The saints wind up poor or dead or so in love with their neighbors and enemies that they can't stop giving themselves away. I don't think that's what China means.

Isaiah hammers away—every hope is empty—but one. "The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass." Notice scripture repeating itself. *Apparently we are grass*. Now, grass is good. It's beautiful, Jesus says God clothes flowers of the field better than Solomon, without grass on golf courses and football fields and gardens lots of us would be out of work and our world would be less beautiful. Nothing against grass. *It just doesn't last very long*. That's Isaiah's point. One of you who is nearly 100 years old said the years fly by like telephone polls on the interstate, woosh woosh woosh. When you think our world is 14.7 billion years old, our few years aren't even a candle flicker. We can come up with DIY faith and many do, some of it is beautiful. It just doesn't last, it's gone with us, that's the problem with buffet style faith, a little of this, a little of that, the meal is over and it wasn't even that good. Isaiah insists the only thing that lasts is this, "the word of our God will stand forever." The more of us invested in the Word the more of us will last. When we speak words from the bible they are words from everlasting to everlasting. They save. And not just the words of the bible. The Word made flesh, *Jesus*, is God eternal and almighty in our frail grassy flesh.

I offer books and movies a little more cautiously now. One of you I'm told honors me by going and reading or watching what I refer to. That's a little intimidating. But it shouldn't be more intimidating than this: God is listening. We should all tremble. So *don't* watch this: I just finished *Breaking Bad*, a show about a

chemistry teacher who realizes the money is better in cooking crystal meth. Like \$100 million better. The image is from the episode when his wife discovers what he does, and asks if someone will knock on their door one day to hurt them. That's his response. He's as terrible human being. He's also smart, so he keeps trying to hustle to make things right, to protect his family, to stay ahead of the bad guys. He just can't. He spirals farther down, a set of lies to protect against that set of lies, then another murder to cover up the last, and by the end it's all gone, no money, no family, no friends, just a shell of a person. All the things he wanted are good things—family, money, power. Walter White just seeks them in the most selfish way possible. And no one escapes justice forever. No one does. In the first season his teenager partner asks him why he's doing this. "Folks don't just break bad at age 50 yo." And Walter White says, "I feel awake." Sounds religious, doesn't it? In the last season he tells his estranged wife he didn't really cook meth for his family. "I did it for me," he said. "I liked it. I was good at it." All that energy and brilliance wasted with a life twisted in on itself. I'm guessing we all know people like that.

Isaiah wouldn't be surprised. The only thing that lasts is the Word of the Lord. Advent is a season for a hard scrubbing brush to scrape all other allegiances off our souls and give us the one thing that gives life: *Christ*. Everything else withers.

So that opens a question. What are you hoping will save your life? I'm on a diet, it's sort of working, is that my hope, some future improved version of myself? What else? A job, or a better one? A spouse? A different one? Your kids, doing what you couldn't? Reputation? Your politics? Or this—religion? All the trappings of being a good Christian person? These are not all bad things. And they fade. If we trust them to save us they will kill our souls. There is only one thing that won't. The Word of the Lord.

Final point today the character of our God. This passage reminds us of the Exodus, with God as the conqueror who drives out Israel's enemies. "The Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him." Israel's enemies can mock God all they want. His arm is not too short, as they will soon see. But then this in the very next verse: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." A tender image right after a warrior one. God is both. Reliably strong and unimaginably gentle. Isaiah says all other gods are fakes—it will hurt you to worship them. That sounds like a conservative exclusive tough sort of position. *And* Isaiah says the true God is more tender than we can imagine. That sounds like a liberal cuddly sort of God. And do you see now why the words liberal and conservative are garbage? There is only one God and he is out of his mind in love with you, more tender than a mom wiping away tears from her child's face.

Here is one of my favorite images for Jesus. St. Augustine compares Jesus to a mother pelican. Looks tough, right? Here in North Carolina we can see pelicans hunt and fly, they look prehistoric and cool and a little frightening. In ancient zoology they thought mother pelicans fed their young. . . by tearing off bits of their own flesh. More than one mother has told me she *totally* gets this image, yep, motherhood, ripping myself apart to feed them, that's correct. Well. That's God. God is tough and tender, fierce and gentle. And now anytime you see a pelican you can think of Jesus. Just like all creation is meant to remind us of him—the God who bleeds for us, so we can nestle up together in the nest and be fed with his flesh. Let's do that together at his table. This meal is what the nativity is about every year—the strength and fragility of our God. Pay attention when God's word repeats itself. Amen and amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This from John Sawyer *The Fifth Gospel*.