

Heaven Comes Down III
December 14, 2014: 3rd Sunday of Advent
Boone Methodist; Jason Byassee

Friends last Sunday may have been my favorite among you yet. The children's nativity was marvelous—kids in ill-fitting costumes and perfectly fitting voices. Random sheep wandering out of place, a shepherd's staff broken and distracting, solos, including one by my boy Will, perfect to break your heart. JB Beyer's mission minute about his work in Bradford Park. About my sermon I was saying to one of you that's about as loud as I get. And you said "that's as loud as you get yet." In other words there's some chance you all may make a preacher out of me. And there's some chance Jesus may make disciples out of all of us.

And Pastor Jeff announced about the babies. A flood of babies. Some grandchildren, like Anna Catherine. Others children like Phoebe Lei, Rachel Elizabeth, Archer Dean, Carrick Waters, we Methodists not only make babies we give them really cool names. I love this—because Advent is a time when the *church* is pregnant. We're like Mary at 9 months, feet sore, back in pain, child not kicking much anymore because things are too cramped in the womb. The whole Christian life is a matter of waiting for something, or some One, to be born in our midst, to rule. Friends listen to this word from the prophet Isaiah about the world God is trying to birth into being. And remember this about pregnancy—it's always temporary. Just as surely as pregnancy has an end, so too the world God is birthing will come. Hear these words from the book you love.

Isaiah 61:1-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. 5 Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; 6 but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. 7 Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. 8 For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

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

Do you ever wonder how Jesus *learned* who he was? We Christians know Jesus is God eternal, but he didn't always know that about himself necessarily. Jesus was ordinary in a sense. He didn't levitate 2 feet off the ground, lasers didn't shoot out of his eyes, he wasn't a superhero with a latex costume under his clothes. He was a Jewish kid. I suppose Jesus learned who he was the same place most of us do: on his mother's knee. *Mary* told him the stories of Israel—the creation, the flood, the exodus, the kings, the exile, the prophets. Did she stop there? Did she leave the end open? The end about *his* betrayal, the nails, the torturing to death, the tomb, the part *he* would play in the story?

Maybe Mary taught Jesus with this passage. When he first stood up to preach in his hometown he read this text:¹

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Here is Jesus' whole sermon we have recorded:² "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Folks had wondered who that bit of Isaiah is about. *Who is it* on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, who brings good news to the poor? Is it the messiah? Is it all Israel? Jesus' sermon answers in one word: me! And they love it! His hometown goes bananas!³ "All spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." This was a little like the children's nativity last week. After our adorable kids paraded across the chancel we could have just had the benediction and gone home, all spoke well of them. Or think of when a minister raised up in our church takes this pulpit how proud we all are, to see a Lindley Sharp Curtis up here or Austin Eggers. Hey, we made that kid into that servant of the Lord, all speak well of them. All spoke well of Jesus. Draw the curtain, cue the band/choir, let's all go home.

Not so fast, Jesus says. The story from Isaiah is a little more difficult than that. It's good news, but it might *feel* like bad news. Isaiah is good news that goes like this, someone calls you up and says, 'good news, I saved half the belongings.' Uh, wait, sounds like there's some bad news in there first, like the house was on fire. Or this, 'The *good* news is I get you a *severance* package.' Uh, thanks, I'm afraid I know what the bad news is. . . Jesus' bad news is that the gospel isn't *just* for them. It's *through* them *for* everybody else. That's true of us too. God isn't just *for us*. God is *for* the world *through* us. Three ways Isaiah says this—with Jubilee, us gentiles, and with Eden restored.

One, Jubilee. Isaiah puts it this way, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." What Isaiah is talking about, what Jesus is talking about, is the year of Jubilee. Every 50 years in Israel all debts were to be cancelled, slaves set free, lands went back to their ancestral owners. Every seven years was a lesser jubilee, a Sabbath year. Everything is leveled out, a hard reset is hit. No one in Israel is to own anyone forever. No one is to be indebted unendingly. You might be thinking, hey, Israel must've been a great place to borrow money! And a lousy place to lend it. And you'd be right. There's a reason the poor followed Jesus, and the rich called their Roman friends to have them ready a cross.

Jesus is our Jubilee. His kingdom is marked by generosity. Generosity that levels playing fields. That's good news for the poor and difficult for the rich. And in a world where billions live on less than \$2 a day, friends we are all unimaginably rich.

The Christmas season is a time of generosity. And exchanging gifts *is* wonderful. But it's a sort of *obligation* isn't it? We know who we *have to* get gifts for, we know who owes *us* gifts. What if we give gifts to those we *don't* owe them to? At Hardin Park School a teacher surviving cancer started a program called the love bus. Fourth graders go around giving out gifts to total strangers. My boy Sam gave a gift card to a stranger in a store and the man burst into tears. Generosity from an unknown child, started by a teacher giving thanks for life. Smells like the Jubilee. Last week we had an offering three or four times higher than normal. Maybe we should have kids sing more often. Generosity, Jubilee, great gifts given to God. When I see the gifts out in the chapel for children you'll never meet, I imagine God says hey, there's a glimpse, that's what I mean by Jubilee. Here's the greatest gift. We give God our sin. That's all we have, and it's ugly. Thomas

¹ Luke 4:18-19

² Luke 4:21

³ Luke 4:22

Merton, a Catholic monk I admire, says this, humanity has yet to devise a weapon so powerful as one sin. This from a monk who protested nuclear weapons. We give God our sin. And God gives us Jesus. Grace. Life in the kingdom. *Generosity we cannot fathom*. That's Jubilee, that's Jesus. Look for chances to be generous friends, in Advent in Christmas, or any old day.

Something else in Isaiah.⁴ *Foreigners* worshiping Israel's God. Any of you Jewish? Raise your hands? Alright, then, the gospel is not *for* any of us then. It's for God's people--Israel. What are any of the rest of us doing here? God chose one people—Israel—to be his treasure, his example to the world. What are *we* doing here? Isaiah starts to explain it.⁵ "Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines . . . you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory." Israel's hope wasn't just for Israel. It's for the whole world. At the end of time, when messiah came, all people, *even us gentiles—foreigners, outsiders—* would come and worship Israel's God. I hope you feel the force of this. We don't belong in God's house. This isn't our gospel, the bible is not our book, we are not God's people. This is what we mean by *grace*.⁶ We're invited where we *don't* belong. Lots of people feel like they don't belong in church. Like they're being judged. Like they don't fit. *Good. You get it*. The gospel is only for you who *know* you don't belong. Those of us who presume we belong are in danger. This is human nature: we assume the bad people are *out there*—terrorists or politicians or our enemies or whatever, we in here are good. The gospel says no. The bad person is me. And Jesus is out to save bad people. This is dangerous good news. After Jesus' townspeople are proud of him he says, hey, Israel was always chosen *for other people*. And they try and throw him off a cliff (Jesus' sermons tend to end much more violently than most churches sermons). It is a surprise, and maybe an outrage, that God is actually *for* somebody else. So the church had better be *for* somebody else too.

Let me give you an example. Ken and Patti Connelly have recently moved here to be with family, and what a gift they've been. Patti will soon be our volunteer director of ministry with adults, Ken has had us all baking cookies for prisoners, they sing in the choir (the Connelys, not the prisoners—yet). Ken told me of a Kairos prison ministry weekend where those in prison munched cookies y'all baked (thank you). He told me of one man who came even though his friends made fun of him. He was distant. Then a speaker talked on forgiveness and this man started to warm up. He shared with Ken his hesitation to believe in Jesus, or act like a Christian. The gangs in the prison grind any feeling out of you—no tears, no joy. Ken suggested he just open himself up to God a little and see what happens. And he did, he told the group he would, and months later, he has the best job in the prison, new friends in Kairos vouched for him and he has a position of responsibility he's proud of. He's been out of the gangs two years so he's allowed to see his family again. His lawyer found out he can get out of prison sooner. Your cookies helped these dominos start falling. Jesus did the real work. I guess Jesus isn't done saving bad people yet. And to be saved by Jesus you have to *know* you're bad! Jesus *is* release to the captives. Do you see how the gospel isn't for us alone. It's *through* us *for* those our society despises.

Third thing going on in this passage.⁷ There are hints of Eden. Those who mourn⁸ "will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory." Trees that show God's glory, like the tree that caused our fall, like the tree that is our salvation, like the tree at the end of time whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. A little later,⁹ "as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown

⁴ II. God is for Israel (not us) . . .

⁵ Isaiah 61:5-6

⁶ IIa. God is for Israel (and through them for us).

⁷ III. God is replanting Eden

⁸ Isaiah 61:3

⁹ Isaiah 61:11

in it to spring up, so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” God is replanting Eden. The church is the first tender shoots. This is hope unimaginable. That every wrong we humans have done on the planet can be undone by God’s grace.

And have we ever made a hash of God’s world. It’s been so painful to watch the news lately: a torture report, everyone screaming what it means. Protests, folks demanding justice for black young men killed by police. Everyone spleening and denouncing someone else. And look what everyone says: Me? I’m innocent. It’s you, over there! We Christians should know better. You say I sinned? You’re absolutely right. In fact I’m far worse than you thought. Let me tell you all my sins. And *now* do you see how merciful Jesus is? God can take our sins and rebuild Eden from them.

Boone is not a town given to protests historically. And yet on campus, minority students and their allies have been protesting—black bodies matter, black lives matter, I can’t breathe. They’re absolutely right, every life matters, and no one should be choked to death for selling cigarettes. LeBron James, the greatest basketball player alive, wears a shirt in support of this man, and he’s vilified, told to shut up, go back to entertaining us. On the other side I think of the police whom we all count on to protect us. Bobby Creed and Brandon Greer in our congregation two of them, several others retired. And they *honor* their calling with utmost professionalism. I asked Sergeant Creed once if he’s ever fired his gun in the line of duty and he looked at me like I’d blasphemed, *no*, and I hope to retire never having done so. He’s only used his nightstick to save someone’s life who was choking on the drugs he’d swallowed. He wears a bullet proof vest though, because colleagues have been fired upon, and lost their lives. And he has colleagues who are black cops. *And* cops have been part of some of these protests around the country. Because good cops don’t choke people to death. And they know they can’t do their jobs for us without the trust of minority communities.

Here’s what everyone is saying. Treat me like a human being. With dignity. And respect. Don’t let me fear for my children’s lives when they’re out in public, whether my child is an unarmed black man, or an armed but still very much frightened policeman, whether white or black.

Here’s what *God* is saying. Treat *me* like a human being. Because in Jesus I am a human being. And here’s what we do. We betray him. Mock him. Torture him. Crucify him. Bury him. And we say, there, now, anyone else want to be treated like a human being?

Isaiah says God is renewing creation with Jubilee, God is inviting even us gentiles who don’t deserve it to be God’s friends, God is replanting Eden and there’s not a thing we can do to stop it, it’ll come up sure as the grass in the springtime. If we put Jesus in a tomb all that happens is he blows the doors off the thing and now no tomb is safe from God’s invading love. Eden is breaking out in our midst. It starts in the womb of Mary. And one day all the world will be God’s Eden again. Starting in each of our hearts.

I spent the past week at a monastery in Kentucky praying for each of you. Thomas Merton is the most famous monk of the last century. He lived at the abbey I was at. He was walking in downtown Louisville one time and had this experience. Remember this is a southern city, very much divided by race in the late 1950s, all was no better then than it is now.¹⁰

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers . . . I have the immense joy of being human, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we

¹⁰ Merton

all are. If only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

Friends, you are all shining like the sun, right now. Because God's got a hold of you and won't let go. That's the world God is birthing through Mary, through us, in every blade of grass and in every human face. Amen.