

Text: Isaiah 9:2-7

Title: Reflections While Putting Up the Tree

Location: Community Presbyterian Church, Celebration, FL

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Christmas has a way of marking the passing of another year. We tend to measure life from Xmas to Xmas. Putting up the decorations can be a walk down memory lane—recalling Xmas of yesteryear... Hey, this is the decoration from last year—whew last year was painful...with the loss of our portfolio & the job. I didn't even want to put up the tree.

Oh look this ornament was from our 1st Xmas. & this angel was from the year of my cancer scare. & this elf was from my childhood. I remember the smell of Mom's cookies wafting through the house.

Malcolm Muggeridge writes: All of us have a sense of homesickness, a longing to go home to enjoy an atmosphere of perpetual security and love & it's during Christmas this longing surface's. It gets disguised in the nostalgia we feel-- longing for another time & place.

Take a moment to reflect on your childhood Christmas: Can you see the family tree? Remember running down the hall to open your presents. Can you recall your favorite gifts: The GI Joe's, the bicycle, the surfboard and water bed...all that coal in my stocking. We had a Victrola which played 78 records of Bing Crosby singing carols.

The nostalgia we feel at Christmas is for more than tradition—it's a longing for family and peace within.

I'd be remiss not to point out that for some Christmas is not so positive. Folks whose memories are sad and they feel alone as their loved ones have gone onto glory. This time of year heightens people's depression...and the suicide rate escalates. Why because this longing is unfulfilled. Are you longing for anything this Xmas?

Beyond the longing for a sense of home and loved ones, there's a longing to be content and no longer dominated by sin, sorrow, pain; to be at peace with oneself and others. Whether we realize it or not we are longing for God.

Isaiah addresses this longing and hope. Isaiah prophesized for 64 yrs until he was sawed in half. Isaiah's ministry came at a time of tremendous gloom for the wayward people of God. He warned of their impending doom (the brutal Assyrians were coming). But also spoke of hope and a future of happiness coming with the arrival of the Christmas baby. Isaiah 7:14 Behold a virgin will be with child and bear a son and His name will be called Emmanuel. Incidentally, modern scholars do not believe this is a credible source of prophecy because the word virgin might be a reference to a young maiden. But if Matthew chose to use this verse as his source, who was his theological teacher—hanging out with Jesus three years? & if the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit I am willing to follow Matthew's references regarding Jesus.

How would you describe Utopia? Compare your idea to Isaiah's who writes of a royal court where justice, righteousness and truth have the last word. Imagine a world without lawyers, doctors and police. Where a hand shake seals the deal. A world where there is no infection, pollution, crime or disease...no more pain or struggling. Instead the presence and power of God are enjoyed daily.

I thought a text that mentioned the government was appropriate for this Xmas season. Maybe you were hoping for relief from the chaos of the real world, hoping to hear stories about angels coming to our rescue, about peace and joy??? Xmas is all about God's peace, joy and divine assistance.

Jesus was born to bring us relief from the destruction sin creates. All our longings and hopes are satisfied in the life of a child. A baby that comes to bring heaven and earth together, reconciling God with humanity. The names of the baby depict the character of God & the dynamics of His kingdom.

Isaiah calls Him **Wonderful Counselor**. The insights Jesus bring are not simply wise perceptions about how to handle life's trials. Jesus brings the mind of God (1 Cor. 2) Christ guides us to God's way of thinking. For instance, not selfishly reacting to difficult situations, but insight into how to handle our problems &/or challenging people with His grace & redemptive care Note the intimacy that accompanies God's counsel Psalm 32 "I will counsel you with My eye upon you." Or Isaiah 30:21 "Your ear will hear a word behind you this is the way walk in it whether you turn to the right or to the left."

Beyond divine Instructions for this life, Jesus brings the revelation of God. That we can know who He is, and how He operates, what God wants from us and what the Lord wants to give to us. We don't have to search through human philosophy to understand our purpose in life. Jesus came to tell us we can obtain firsthand knowledge of and experience of the Holy!

Jesus is called **Mighty God**. Might needs to be differentiated from the power to subjugate others, but rather should be interpreted as the source that effects a change within us. The power that liberates from what enslaves us. The power that transforms bad into good/death into life. This power is available to us! We don't have to nostalgically long for the days gone by when God use to move among humanity. God is here today.

A man suffered a heart attack and had open heart bypass surgery. He awakened from the surgery to find himself in the care of nuns at the Cabrini Catholic Hospital. As he was recovering, a nun asked him questions regarding how he was going to pay for his treatment. She asked if he had health insurance. He replied, in a raspy voice, No health insurance. The nun asked if he had any money in the bank. He replied, no money in the bank. The nun asked do you have a relative who could help you? He said I only have a spinster sister who is a nun. The nun became agitated and announced loudly, Nuns are not spinsters! Nuns are married to God. The man replied, Send the bill to my brother in law.

But if it is true that God is here with us now, than why aren't people experiencing God in more tangible ways? 2 Timothy warns about those who are always learning but never come to the knowledge of the truth. For example when Elvis Presley was found dead he was face down in an open Bible and a book about the Dead Sea scrolls.

Elvis typifies many Christians, who dabble in God, acquiring more information, but not actualizing the power Christ brings over sin and minimal living.

The question is if Jesus came to take away sin then why is sin still around? Oscar Cullman the great Swiss/ German theologian describes human history in terms of war. In every war there is a battle that determines the outcome. In WW2 it was D day. Everyone knew that if we could establish the beach head at Normandy we would win the war. The Nazis' knew that if they could drive the allies back into the sea they would win the war. It was called the longest day. The Nazi general Ramell knew WW2 was over at D day, that's why he joined in the plot to kill Hitler.

The decisive battle had already been won. But between D day and V day there was a lot of suffering. More people suffered horror and pain and death between those days than had before. Cullman says we live between God's D day and the ultimate V Day--Christ coming into our world was about God confronting the forces of darkness on our behalf.

However, though sin will not have the last word, sin presently gets defeated as Christ's Spirit moves within us, guiding us to win the daily battles, growing our faith. Just as a Baby is born and then grows; as Christ grows within us--sin loses

Jesus is **Eternal Father**. Heb 1:3 This is a sticking pointing in contemporary thought where scholars argue Jesus was only a man. However, if Jesus is not divine then He merely brings one opinion about God among many. But if He is Eternal Father who as John states "created the world in the beginning," then He brings the power to handle our sins and has the authority to dictate our lives.

This is the real reason people question Jesus' identity because if they dethrone Him as God , they remove His authority to tell people how to live their lives.

The Prince of Peace. Only Jesus definitively answers the ultimate questions of life. There comes a point when we all need peace with God. The problem is there is no peace with God until your sins are removed and God's judgment is nullified. Luther says everyone must die their own death. But Christ has entered our world to die on our behalf and establish a forever relationship with us. Jesus brings peace to the troubled conscience.

Are you carrying around guilt about your failures and mistakes? Jesus has gone to the cross and died for our sins—God never sees that part of us. He only sees a child of His that was lost but has responded to His love and is completely covered in the forgiveness Christ provides. This is your new identity!

Reading through the genealogy section of the Xmas story you come across some surprises: prostitutes, adulterers, murders, cowards, failures, mixed in with the names of the super saints...all being counted in the genealogy of Christ, all being named as part of the heritage our of savior. You are part of that heritage!

Actually genealogies can be interesting... I once had a clerk of Session who had a relative that signed the Declaration of Independence. I have a claim to fame, my grandma used to date Al Capone! The difference between a good pedigree and a mutt!

Sherlock Holmes and his side kick Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal they laid down for the night. Some hours later Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend awake. Watson what do you see? Watson replied I see stars. Holmes continued, What does that tell you? Watson pondered for a moment:

-Astronomically; it tells me there are millions of galaxies. Astrologically I observe that Saturn is in Leo. - Horologically I deduce the time is approximately a quarter past 3. -Meteorologically I suspect we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. -Theologically, I see God is all powerful and we are insignificant. What does it tell you? Holmes replied, Watson, it means someone has stolen our tent!

Sometimes the meaning of Xmas gets obscured with all the new theologies & politically correct agendas that claim Christianity is not legitimate or logical...

Virgin Birth—defies the laws of science. Divine presence—Jesus was just a good man. God with us? Then why all the evil on earth. Salvation from sin? Man is just a biological being evolving intellectually and morally. Eternal life? Death is final.

In the midst of these secular arguments the Xmas message is the God who created you wants to have a relationship with you, guide your steps through this sin stained world, and bring blessings into your life. He loves you!

God's Xmas gift is the wonderful Counselor guiding our steps to abundant life—actualizing the power of Mighty God to face life's trials, confident in the fact that He is our eternal Father, trusting the prince of peace to have the last word in our sin tainted world.

May your Christmas surpass mere nostalgia and actually satisfy your inner longings. Whether you realize it or not what you feel while putting up the decorations is not to go back to your childhood home, but to enjoy our ultimate home that the arrival of Jesus Christ brings.