

“Saving Presence”

Isaiah 63:7-9

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,
because of all that the LORD has done for us,
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

For he said, “Surely they are my people,
children who will not deal falsely”;
and he became their savior
in all their distress.

It was no messenger or angel
but his presence that saved them;
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Saving Presence

Isaiah 63:7-9

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I.

I would like to start today by conveying that the days following Christmas, what is referred to in the liturgical calendar as “Christmas Tide,” is a very weird time of the year for sermon writing as the emotional winds of Christmas are quickly leaving the sail. The season of Advent, in general, and the service of Lessons and Carols and Christmas Eve Candlelight service, in specific, are such fertile fields from which to harvest sermon ideas; so many warm memories, wonderful images, and wantonly jolly desires. Another reason for this being a weird time of year to write a sermon, is the after-Christmas lull which, seemingly, descends upon many of us. It is something akin to a deep, ever so satisfying exhaling, followed by a “WHEW!”

II.

The days right after Christmas seem to be both an opportunity and an obligation to pick up the pieces, regroup, and steady the ship. As is illustrated by today’s attendance, many folks are traveling, recuperating and reassessing; which is fine, and as it should be. In many ways, this span of days in which we might give ourselves over to a tad bit of idleness, offers us, both, some final Christmas “presents” (as in gifts) and an enduring Christmas “presence” (as in the actuality of God’s companionship in our lives). These words, “presents” and “presence” are homophones: they sound alike, but have different spellings and different meanings. It is to both of these words that I would turn our attention to this morning: “presents” as in Christmas presents, and “presence” as in God’s presence in our lives felt so strongly at Christmas.

III.

I had a rather strange realization this Christmas (*I told you, this is a weird time of year to write a sermon*) and I would like to share it with you. When I was a kid growing up I lived within 300 yards of my grandmother, and a 1/2 mile of 3 aunts and uncles. In the days between Christmas and New Year, we had the tradition of visiting everyone’s homes for the set purpose of seeing each other’s decorated trees, and the all the presents received by the members of each family which were neatly arranged underneath and around their tree.

This practice of putting presents on parade, made for a fine and pretty site and, I suppose, it was done in a nod to the working class sensibilities of the very blue collar community in which I grew up. I imagine, in some ways, it was a gesture of "*Look, we made it.*" Which was ok in my book. Especially for people whose parents had lived through the depression. When chocolate and an orange in one's stocking seemed, and really was, quite a luxury indeed.

IV.

I was reminded of all this the afternoon of Christmas day, when I noticed that all of *our* presents which, just a few hours earlier, had sat wrapped and robustly configured, were now eagerly employed or staged for use and all that remained was a lovely, but lonely red, plaid tree-skirt. Clothes received were either already being worn or now hung in closets. Blank crossword puzzle books sat stacked by dad's recliner ready to be worked on all winter, mom's crockery was washed and ready to use at the very next meal, and the various other books, games and ephemera were already being read, played and otherwise employed.

The dawning awareness of these two contrasting practices, the display of presents in my youth, and the dispersing of presents in adulthood, helped me to appreciate the very different ways people come to understand, utilize, and symbolize such Christmas presents, both in their giving and in their receiving. The same is also true for how we regard the presence of God in our lives, most easily perceived at Christmas.

V.

Though it is always the case, this year's Christmas Eve Candlelight service was particularly poignant in this regard, as I came to appreciate that for a great many of the people gathered here that night, almost 30 of whom were children, the scripture readings, carols, candlelight, and piano pieces are THE means through which those attending sensed the spirit of Christmas, and the one time of the year that God's presence in their lives is most reliably felt.

This is not to say God isn't present at all other times throughout the year, but the candlelight service is that particular occasion when folks really attune their eyes to see, their ears to hear, and their hearts to feel. Which is great, which is cause for rejoicing, which is the on-going miracle of Christmas. Though, I'm sure, such a sense lingers well into Christmastide and beyond, it is a difficult feeling to sustain alone and in isolation.

VI.

As we travel away from the manger and our everyday world comes back into focus, our connection to God's presence so strongly felt while singing *Silent Night* begins to wane and fade as we are set adrift into life's vicissitudes. Though, perhaps, it would be convenient to ascribe this as a modern phenomenon, today's scripture reading from Isaiah attests to the truth that the drift from the realization of God's presence is an ancient and recurring occurrence, indeed. In many ways, it is the very reason for the Christmas story itself.

The book of Isaiah, as a whole, is a large unwieldy tome almost certainly composed by three different authors. This does not mean it isn't cohesive, or that it should be understood as anything less than the inspired word of God. What it does mean, however, is that passages like the one before us must be taken not just within the context of its historical circumstances, but also with the specific section of Isaiah in which it occurs.

VII.

WARNING, if these days after Christmas have not already sufficiently lulled you, this next section of the sermon surely will. The historic person Isaiah ben Amoz lived in the Kingdom of Judah during the reigns of four kings from the mid to late 8th-century BCE. During this period, the Assyria empire was expanding westward from its origins in modern-day northern Iraq towards the Mediterranean, destroying first Aram (modern Syria), then the Kingdom of Israel, and finally subjugating Judah in 701. Against this backdrop, the book of Isaiah is focused on the main role of Jerusalem in God's plan for the world.

The first author of Isaiah, "Proto-Isaiah," speaks of Israel's desertion of God and what will follow: Israel will be destroyed by foreign enemies. However, after the people, the country, and Jerusalem are punished and purified, a holy remnant will live in God's abode called Zion, where they will be governed by God's chosen king (messiah) under the presence and protection of God.

VIII.

The second author, "Deutero-Isaiah," has as a subject the liberation of Israel from captivity in Babylon in something of a second Exodus which the God of Israel will arrange using Cyrus, the Persian conqueror, as his agent.

The third author, known as “Trito-Isaiah,” from whom today’s scripture passage arises, writes of Jerusalem, the Temple, the Sabbath, and, of particular interest to us today, Israel’s salvation. Time for a 7th inning stretch, huh? We good?

Today’s sermon text is a rather compacted version of the overarching narrative of the entire book of Isaiah. The gracious and praiseworthy actions of God done on behalf of Israel are recounted. Then we have a subtle, almost sarcastic reminder of the the importance of not dealing falsely with God (or else). Finally, we arrive at the gist of it: that it is God’s *own* presence which, time and time again, has saved them; not some intermediary angel or messenger.

IX.

The message set before us today, from Isaiah 63:7-9, is the same message and, really, the *only* message that arises from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament: the God has always been, and will forever be, present in our lives in the effort to bring salvation to the world. However that might be accomplished, and for however long that may take. We see this in God’s presence in geo-political realities working to save the nation of Israel. We see this in the presence of God born as a child in the manger who is the saving Messiah. And, we see this in Christ’s presence on the cross winning salvation not just for the children of God, Jew and Gentile alike, but for the entire creation finally and fully.

X.

For us, the question now becomes what we are to do having heard this story of God’s saving presence in our lives? Do we simply put such salvation on display for all to see (especially ourselves) like presents neatly arranged under the Christmas tree? Or, do we hasten to put our salvation to work like presents quickly worn, employed, and ready at hand? With almost sheer certainty, I will make the claim that if you have come to church to worship this first Sunday in the lull of Christmastide, in person, on the stream or in having read this sermon, you have chosen the latter option.

And, you know what? Look, you made it! Good for you, good for us, and good for our world. Because God’s saving *presence* is not a *present* to be opened just on Christmas Eve. It is the gift of salvation to be used, enjoyed, employed, and played with every Sunday of the year and in every moment of our lives. Amen.