

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-14

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

I'm not going to name names, but if you want to send a present to our house to be opened on a particular day, better make sure you send it same-day delivery. I'm not making a value judgment here about present opening ethics or etiquette. I've simply observed that in my house new things have been appearing frequently since Thanksgiving. Conversation around this matter usually runs something like this:

"Brad, remember to send your Dad a thank-you note for the gift certificates and the scooter and the wagon for the girls."

"Ummm...what gift certificates? What scooter and what wagon?"

"Oh, you know the ones that came in the mail a while ago."

"Really, I didn't notice them, how long ago?"

"Oh, they were sitting around for the better part of this morning, so I figured someone had better open them!"

"Ahhhh, well I suppose that was for the best."

"Right, I mean there might have been something perishable in there – it just wouldn't have been a good idea to wait."

"Riiiiight."

So it was that I came in the door a few nights ago – probably a little more tired than usual; definitely a little more ragged around the edges; and heard the strains of "Away in a Manger". As I turned the corner into the dining room I discovered Emmie, our four-year-old, planted in front of a nativity set arranging little people and animals in a stable. She was immediately ready to tell me the nativity story, and explain all the characters – including the caveat to my question, "Where are the three kings?"

"Daddy – they're wiseguys, not kings."

"Ahhh, yes, of course you're right."

"Right, the two wiseguys are right here," and she pointed them out.

"Well where's the third one?"

"Daddy, I think there were just two, but that's not important," and before I could reestablish my superior knowledge of the Christmas story she said,

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-14

‘just watch this’ and pushed down on an angel sitting on top of the stable. The angel lit up, and sure enough ‘Away in a Manger’ began to play. ‘Very sweet,’ I thought, and then immediately wondered what sort of batteries it takes; wouldn’t want to have it run out in the midst of the fun. However, my thoughts were interrupted by raucous cackling from behind me. Reese, our one-year-old was cackling away and beaming at the crèche. Emmie said, ‘She loves it! Every time she hears the angel she smiles.’

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

My sense is that Reese and Emmie get this. At least they get the gist of Isaiah’s enthusiasm a little better than me. And they get that hearing the angel is more important than batteries or the number of wiseguys. It’s as if they believe the angel is singing right to them. Maybe they’re right...

In the Gospel of Luke we read:

The angel said to them, ‘Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people; for there is born to you this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’

Do you hear the grace in these words? Martin Luther reflects:

‘O, this is the great joy of which the angel speaks. This is the comfort and exceeding goodness of God that, if anyone believes this, he can boast of the treasure that Mary is his rightful mother, Christ his brother, and God his father. For these things actually occurred and are true, but we must believe. This is the principal thing and the principal treasure in every Gospel. Christ must above all things become our own and we become his. This is what is meant by Isaiah 9:6 ‘Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.’ To you is born and given this child.’

What a beautiful, wonderful, exquisite gift! ‘To you is born and given this child – Jesus.’ And while we sit in awe, examining, and scarcely knowing what to do with this present - this immeasurable grace, we are subject to a certain impulse that is *understandable*, but not all that *helpful*. When we

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-14

receive very nice gifts the first inclination we have is to enshrine them, preserve them.

If I were to guess I'd say we do pretty much the same thing with the significance of such holidays as Christmas and Easter. Perhaps that's why we build them up so much with over-the-top pageantry, because we're just following our first inclination having received these unique and priceless gifts. Annie Dillard surmises as much in describing a visit to Bethlehem and the grotto of the nativity:

Any patch of ground anywhere smacks more of God's presence on earth, to me, than did this marble grotto. The ugliness of the blunt and bumpy silver star (which marks the supposed exact place of Christ's birth) impressed me. The bathetic pomp of the heavy, tasseled brocades, the marble, the censer hanging from chains, the embroidered antependium, the aspergillum, the crosiers, the ornate lamps – some human's idea of elegance – bespoke grand comedy, too, that God put up with it. And why should he not? Things here on earth get a whole lot worse than bad taste.

But Luther has thought about this as well and offers this insight:

Therefore see to it that you do not treat the Gospel only as history, for that is only transient; neither regard it only as an example, for it is of no value without faith. Rather, see to it that you make this birth your own and that Christ be born in you. This will be the case if you believe, then you will repose in the lap of the virgin Mary and be her dear child. But you must exercise this faith and pray while you live; you cannot establish it too firmly. This is our foundation and inheritance, upon which good works must be built.

Truth is what cuts through our attempts to enshrine the Gospel, to pageantize the incarnation, to diminish God's call upon each of our lives. Listen to the broader explanation of the angel's message:

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-14

John 1:1-14

The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one.

Everything was created through him; nothing – not one thing! – came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.

There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light. He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn't even notice. He came to his own people, but they didn't want him. But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, he made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-14

Generous inside and out, true from start to finish - or in the words we're more used to - *full of grace and truth*. Apparently that's also to extend to our own lives. We're made to be *our true selves, our child-of-God selves*, having to consider what the truth is about ourselves daily. Luther puts it this way:

Let everyone examine himself in the light of the Gospel and see how far he is from Christ, and what is the character of his faith and love. There are many who are enkindled with dreamy devotion, and when they hear of the poverty of Christ, they are almost angry with the citizens of Bethlehem. They denounce their blindness and ingratitude, and think, if they had been there, they would have shown the Lord and his mother a more kindly service, and would not have permitted them to be treated so miserably. But they do not look by their side to see how many of their fellow humans need their help, and which they ignore in their misery. Who is there upon earth that has no poor, miserable, sick, erring ones around him? Why does he not exercise his love to those? Why does he not do to them as Christ has done to him?

Grace and truth. *Grace and truth*. So simple, and yet there is infinity encompassed between those words. Hear the explanation and joy from Saint Chrysostom:

Truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take flight, the power of death is broken. For this day paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed, error is driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness diffused and spread on every side – a heavenly way of life has been implanted on the earth, angels communicate with humans without fear, and we now hold speech with angels.

Why is this? Because God is now on earth, and humanity in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He has come on earth, while being fully in heaven; and while

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-14

complete in heaven, he is without being diminished on earth. Though he was God, he became human, not denying himself to be God. Though being the unchanging Word, he became flesh that he might dwell amongst us.

What shall I say? What shall I utter? 'Behold an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' Mary is present, who is both virgin and mother. Joseph is present, who is called father. He is called husband, she is called wife. The names indeed are lawful, but there is no other bond. We speak here of words, not of 'realities.'

To Him, then, who out of confusion has wrought a clear path; (across the infinite span between grace and truth a bridge); to Christ, to the Father, and to the Holy Spirit, we offer all praise, now and forever. Amen.