

Happy Eighth Day of Christmas, everyone! Since it's 2017, I trust no one actually got any maids a'milking. But thinking about that song, I can't help but bring up that dark side of the Christmas Season: disappointment with the presents we got.

I won't ask you to raise your hand, but have you ever gotten something you were... less than thrilled about? Maybe you got socks and underwear instead of the new toy you were eyeballing. Or maybe that new gadget you were so excited about turned out to be just sort of... eh... once you got it out of the box.

More than a few of us in here sort of feel that way about 2016. It was a difficult year for many of us. Our city began 2016 recovering from a devastating tornado - many families are still recovering. Our city was rocked by the shootings of police officers in July. Our church experienced a painful leadership transition. The whole year was consumed by a divisive, brutal election. It was hard on a personal level, too. Many of us have had to say goodbye to someone we loved. We've experienced anxiety about job transitions. Relationships have ended, often painfully. Many of us have a good deal of anxiety about the future.

Because it's New Year's Day, we can't help but wonder: will 2017 be more of the same? Do we have any good reason to hope for better?

So today I want to say: Yes. While our future is uncertain, what we can be confident of is this: God is with us, and we're not done yet. As we look to the next year, we will continue to be the people, the Church, God has called us to be. Because we know the God of our present is the God of our past and the God of our future.

This is difficult to see in the midst of fear, pain and anxiety. It is precisely in these times of uncertainty we need reminders that God is at work. Today is the last day in our Advent/Christmas series called PURE IMAGINATION. Throughout this series, we've been hearing from the prophet Isaiah, who spoke to God's people during her darkest times.

Again and again, the prophet has offered light in darkness. Assurances that God is not finished with us - that in fact God is with us and still at work. These visions have seemed impossible - pure imagination. But we've seen that Isaiah seeks to purify our imaginations, to help us see not the world that is, but the world God is bringing to be through Jesus' birth, death and resurrection.

[Scripture Slide] Again and again, we've found that when we see the world as the prophet invites us to, we can see more clearly how God is inviting us to join in the recreative work. So once more, let's turn to the prophet.

Isaiah 63 was written after God's people had been conquered by Babylon. For 70 years, the capital city of Jerusalem laid in ruins while the educated and elite made new lives in Babylon. But finally, two generations later, the Exiles were allowed to return home. 70 years of prayers

and petitions. 70 years of waiting and hoping and longing. 70 years of shame and degradation. All finally over.

Except... when they got back, nothing was as great as they thought it was going to be. They rebuilt Jerusalem. They rebuilt God's temple. But it still just wasn't the same. They were disappointed, to say the least. They wondered - what have we done wrong? Why isn't it like the good ole days?

God's people got exactly what they asked for, only to realize it wasn't what they really wanted.

Sound familiar?

The first bit of Isaiah 63 is an oracle of Judgment. God is out making war with the nations, establishing justice, defending the poor and outcast, and turns to find no one is helping. As she has again and again throughout her long history, Israel is ignoring God, refusing to be the partner God invited her to be.

Beginning in verse 7, the prophet offers a long prayer of confession. Again and again in the prayer, the prophet confesses that Israel has never been the people God desired. Again and again, he reaffirms that it is not Israel's faithfulness that makes God great, but God's faithfulness. So today, I want to focus on the God we meet in the first few verses, because it is this God who is with us:

I will tell of the Lord's unfailing love. I will praise the Lord for all he has done for us. I will rejoice in his great goodness to Israel, which he has granted according to his mercy and love.

He said, "They are my very own people. Surely they will not betray me again." And he became their Savior.

In all their suffering he also suffered, and he personally rescued them.
In his love and mercy he redeemed them. He lifted them up and carried them through all the years. -- Isaiah 63:7-9

The prophet sets out to tell of Yahweh's "unfailing love". The Hebrew word the prophet uses here is *chesed*. It's a word that specifically refers to the honoring of a covenant. So the prophet is about to explain how God is faithful to Israel (again, despite the fact that Israel has not been faithful in turn).

The prophet reminds us we're not alone: we're in this together. God's faithfulness isn't just to you or to me, but to the people of God. To the Church. None of you has suffered alone this year. We have been in this together from the beginning, and we'll continue to come together no matter what lies ahead.

That matters because God is not finished with us. Here at the beginning of his announcement, the prophet declares he will recount all God has done for us not because the present is rosy but precisely because it's not. It's when times are tough we need to remember that the God of our present is the God of our past. The God who has done great things for us in the past will continue to be faithful to us in the present.

The prophet reminds us that the way things are is not the way things have always been. He reminds us that God is still at work.

We can be sure this is true precisely because of what we celebrated a week ago. God has become one of us. God has entered into our story. The prophet said, **In all their suffering he also suffered, and he personally rescued them**, and we know this is fulfilled in Jesus himself. Jesus suffered with and for us. Jesus gave up his own life to rescue us from sin and death. And in his resurrection, Jesus invited us into new life.

Christmas is proof that God is with us. Christmas is proof God is faithful. Finally and forever. Just like in the prophet's day, God is still looking for partners.

Our calling as God's partners has not changed: to be a church that creates spaces for everyone to embrace their God-given calling. There are still lots of people in our community who don't have a church home, who don't realize they bear God's image, that they have a holy vocation to join God in partnering in the world.

God is still calling Catalyst to be the Church we've always been, to be the people God has always wanted. God is not finished in Rowlett, and that means we're not finished either. The God of our past is the God of our present and our future.

Friends, 2016 was hard. But God has been with us throughout and God is still calling us. And we will continue to answer the call, to do the next right thing. To be more loving and more joyful. To make more peace. To be more patient and kind. To be more generous. To be gentle and faithful and self-controlled.

We are not done. God is not done with us. I want to conclude today with Paul's encouragement to the Church in Rome. If you had a rough year, and if you're hoping 2017 will be better, let Paul's words encourage you:

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. -- Romans 8:31-39

God is with us. That was evident in 2016 too. We've welcomed new families into our Church. New children have been born to us. New marriages. We've seen baptisms. People have found a home who previously had no place to belong.

Friends, we are not alone. God has called us together and God is with us. In this next year, we will not shrink back from what God has called us to. We will redouble our efforts to be God's people here in Rowlett. We will risk more, welcome more. We will share more and pray more. We will pursue holy lives. We will not rest. We will not stop. We will continue to be who God called Catalyst to be because the God of our present is the God of our past and our future, and if 2016 has taught us anything, it's that God is with us. So 2017 better watch out!

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide]

1. When was God's presence evident in the last year?
2. When did I feel far from God in the last year?
3. How am I struggling right now to trust God?
4. How can I remind myself of God's goodness in the next year?