

Welcome

Good morning Catalyst. Welcome to December. My name is Tim Basselin, and I’m part of the preaching team here.

I have four very good children. Well, maybe 3 - the one on the naughty list knows who they are. But, they’re children, and they’re ignorant. And one of my jobs as a parent is to help bridge the gap between what they know and what they don’t know. The problem is, this pretty much always sounds like nagging, right? “You probably shouldn’t eat 5 slices of pizza.” “But I’m hungry!” “Yes, I know, but an hour from now when the soccer game starts... it’s going to be a problem.” And that’s just a simple example. Most bridging the gap of ignorance, aka “nagging,” is more complicated. “If you speak to your brother disrespectfully like that, you’re going to speak to other people that way too.” As much wisdom as I may think I’m imparting, well, the eye rolls ensue.

And why does it sound to them like nagging? Because they’re ignorant. I already said that, right? I suspect it’s because children don’t desire a future self that is polite to others . No. Their desire is screeching and clawing the air for ... for sitting in the front seat of the car! “SHOTGUN!” You know, because none of them are ever going to ride in a car again. Ever. And they have to be in the front so they can see ... everything... all the new stuff that may have appeared last night, since our drive to school yesterday.

But here’s the thing. We’re all pretty ignorant as it concerns what we could become, what God sees when God looks at us. The problem isn’t that my kids desire to ride shotgun; it’s that they don’t desire kindness enough. And our problem isn’t that we desire a good Black Friday deal, it’s that we don’t desire other things more.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

It’s true. We are far too easily pleased. We are all ignorant children. We have difficulty desiring well, desiring God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Our desires have been formed by individualism. Our desires have been shaped by consumerism. I wonder if we would recognize the Christ child born in obscurity, or if our weak desires would make it seem like he was not the answer.

Today is the first day of Advent, which is a time that can help us learn to desire well. Today we are asking how we can learn to desire strongly, very strongly. To desire the One who knows our deepest needs and is the only one able to meet those needs.

So join us now as we worship this God who loves us, who knows us, and who makes us into a people who desire well.

Message

Today is the first day of Advent. Christians all over the world are spending the four weeks of Advent preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Advent is a season of hopeful imagination. We look forward to the return of Jesus by putting ourselves in the place of God's people 2,000 years ago as they waited for the birth of the Messiah.

This year, our Advent series is called Christmas is for Dreamers. Christmas is indeed for dreamers, because the Christ-child did not arrive in power to give us what we want. No, it takes a dreamer to see the birth of the messiah and imagine the possibilities of a different way of being in the world that could transform everything and everyone. Today we're asking how we can learn to dream well, not just for satisfying our simple, ignorant desires, but to place all our hope in this tiny baby that's been promised who can transform us, all of us.

Our series this Advent is exploring the words of the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied around 700BC. He was one of the first of God's prophets to look for a savior to rescue us, and today we're going to look in Isaiah 2, but first we need to set the stage.

Perhaps you know the story of the beginnings of the little nation of Israel some 3,000 years ago. How the people God had delivered from slavery in Egypt and led to the Promised Land kept worshiping other Gods, and God kept judging them until they repented and returned to the one true God. And then, when they no longer desired rescue and freedom, their desires turned again to other gods and immediate satisfaction, and the whole cycle would start again. That's the story of the book of Judges, over and over and over. Eventually, the people thought it would be advantageous to have a king, someone to organize their defenses and keep them safe. God told them, "I will keep you safe; I will be your King," but they did not want to wait upon the Lord. And so Saul was chosen as king, then David came next, and his son Solomon followed.

Those are the three we've all heard many stories about, because after those three, the nation split right in the middle. Israel had become the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. And everything got even more complicated.

[Scripture Slide 1] Please turn with me or click on Isaiah 1...

The Northern Kingdom was everything above Jerusalem. And the people there had a problem, because Jerusalem belonged to the Southern Kingdom and that is where the temple was and all of the laws involved worshiping God at the temple. The kings of the North, of course, did not want their people going down to Jerusalem multiple times a year and celebrating feasts. They didn't want their people's hearts to belong to Jerusalem, because that wouldn't be good politics, so they created altars in the north for the people to worship at. And the people did. And their hearts were drawn away from God and they worshipped local gods,. And God warned them, but they did not listen, and so God sent the mighty Assyrian army from the north to sweep down and conquer the Northern Kingdom. That cycle we saw in Judges seemed to continue. The people started worshipping other Gods, and then were overtaken by another nation.

But here is what the people of the Southern Kingdom learned from that. NOTHING. Why? Because they were ignorant, like we all are. You see, ever since Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, the temple that was to be God’s dwelling place, they had never been conquered. And so they said, “HA!! That’s what you get for not worshipping God in the temple! We are safe, because God lives here, and who can conquer Yahweh?”

And this is where we find Isaiah and our text for today. Isaiah was a prophet sent by God to the people in the Southern Kingdom. So Isaiah begins in chpt 1 by delivering this word from God to those who thought their salvation was in the temple:

Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me! As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting— they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings...

Isaiah was writing to a people on the brink of extinction. But they did not know it. They believed their religion was their salvation, and they were comfortable in it. “Just keep going to the temple and everything will be ok. Just keep saying your prayers and God will protect us.”

Are we in danger of this church? How can we know if we are in danger of performing religion for our own protection, because we like our lives the way they are? That can be a difficult question, but Isaiah goes on to give us a hint of how we can know.

When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.

Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.-- Isaiah 1:13-17

This dictum gets repeated in other places in scripture, like at the end of James chpt 1, where he writes: “If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. ²⁷ Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.”

In Isaiah’s time, their religion was concerned with protecting themselves. They were not concerned with protecting the widow and orphan. They were not attempting to free the oppressed. And because they did not listen to the cry of the oppressed, they became the oppressors.

I heard a quote recently that our greatest strength is also always the source of our greatest weakness. If you have the potential to be a place that cares for the most vulnerable, you also have the potential to be a place that most abuses the vulnerable. So we must ask ourselves, is our religion concerned with protecting ourselves, rather than helping others?

Isaiah goes on to pronounce God’s judgement that the Southern Kingdom, even though it has the temple, will be destroyed. He continues this scathing judgement from God in the following

chapters, but before doing so, Isaiah pauses and provides a hopeful vision of the future. Because God is ultimately a dreamer. God invites us into a vision of a better future.

And now, finally, we have arrived at our advent reading for today, our word of Hope.

In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s house will be the highest of all— the most important place on earth. It will be raised above the other hills, and people from all over the world will stream there to worship. People from many nations will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of Jacob’s God. There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths.’”

For the Lord’s teaching will go out from Zion; his word will go out from Jerusalem. The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore.

Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord! -- Isaiah 2:2-5

This is a vision for all the earth! It’s not a vision for just the Southern Kingdom or even for just the whole of Israel. It was not a vision of what Isaiah’s audience wanted, or expected. This is a vision for peace for everyone, which is actually a difficult vision for people who have power or privilege to truly catch. Most of the time we don’t really want to see the world change much, because we like it pretty well the way it is. And so Isaiah’s audience didn’t really listen.

When you begin reading Isaiah’s judgements, and then come upon this vision of hope in Isaiah 2, it seems unrelated, two very different things. But they’re not unrelated, because the only way to develop a desire for peace for everyone is to intimately know those who are oppressed. To care of the widow and the orphan. To listen well to their desires, to learn to long for the things they long for. Because, when we are mostly comfortable in our lives, then the things that we long for are not the things that will bring peace to everyone. If we truly desire peace for everyone, then we have to allow our desires to be shaped by the longings of the oppressed, for they know what needs to change for everyone to have peace.

Advent is a time of hope. But what are we hoping for today? Do we just want everything to keep chugging along as it is? Are we anticipating a Christmas that furthers our own comfortable view of the world? One that satisfies all our own longings? Is our anticipation all wrapped up in the stuff that we want? Or can we imagine a different future? Can we truly long for peace for everyone in such a way that it may call into question how we currently live our lives?

Let’s jump ahead 700 years to the birth of Christ. The story of Christmas, as we all know, is a story about most everyone misunderstanding the promises about the Messiah, the king who would make all things new, all things right. And pretty much everyone missed it.

But there were a few who got it, even very early on. And if we pay attention to them, they can help train our longings for the true Christ.

When you read the Christmas story from Luke this year, pay attention to Mary’s hymn in response to the angel telling her about the Christ inside her. Near the end she sings,

He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. . -- Luke 1:52-53

Mary somehow got it. Her hope was not for a son who would provide for her or save her from the Romans. Her hope may have included that, but it was bigger than that.

And after you begin the Christmas story from chapter 2 of Luke with that famous opening line, “Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register all the empire for taxes....” read on through the end of the chapter and revisit the story of Simeon.

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised.
I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people.
He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!”

Jesus’ parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby’s mother, “This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.” -- Luke 2:25-35

Simeon was longing for true justice. He knew the Messiah would cause many to fall and others to rise, and that the Messiah would ultimately be rejected. And he spoke to Mary and said a sword will pierce her very soul. Imagine Mary for a moment. An angel had appeared and said she would conceive and give birth to the promised one! All the hopes and dreams of the people of Israel for a Messiah, all her hopes and dreams for her life, for her people. And this, 40 days after Jesus’ birth - this prophecy that her son will be opposed, and a sword will pierce her soul.

What is it that we want this Christmas? Do we really desire the kingdom of God? Do we desire it so much that we are willing to sacrifice our own selfishness? Because from the very beginning, following Christ has been about denying ourselves and taking up our crosses.

And after you read about the birth of Christ, read a little further this year to chapter 4, where Christ begins his ministry. And his first act is to open the scroll of Isaiah and read:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come. -- Luke 4:18-19

The time of advent is a time of longing for the Messiah to come and make things right. And so, we wrap presents, and we place them under the tree for all to see. These are our prophecies to one another, their contents hidden, anticipated, unknown. They awaken our desire, as good prophecies should. They are a sign of the true reality.

One day God will establish God’s kingdom on earth, and our swords will be beat into ploughshares. One day we will not train for war, and Zion will be the center of instruction. One day God will be judge of our disputes. In the meantime, we hope.

Advent is a time set aside to intentionally remember what we are hoping for. It’s so easy to forget, when we are not hurting. And when we are hurting, it’s so easy to make it all about us, what we want, what we need.

Advent is a form of fasting, where we say “no” to our own security, and we listen to the voices of the oppressed, and we hurt with them, and we long with them for a God who has the ability that is beyond all of our abilities. This God who has always shown up, and who will show up again.

What is shaping your hope today?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] At Catalyst, we celebrate communion every week, and you don’t need to be a member here to partake with us. If you hope for a Messiah, please join us. We take communion each week because by doing so we practice these difficult truths of hoping in the midst of brokenness. The night before his death, Christ took bread and broke it and said, “This is my body, take, eat.” He then took the cup and said, “This is my blood, poured out for you. Take, drink. Do this in remembrance. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” We hope for the day when we will eat together, all of us, at the Lord’s table, in harmony. On that day we won’t study war any more. But our hope is never disconnected from Christ’s brokenness, the ultimate oppression that was the cross. And in partaking, we remember the necessity of participating in Christ’s brokenness, of dying to ourselves in order to hope for something better than we are capable of.

Before we come, I’m going to lead us in a prayer of Examen. I’ll ask you some questions and give you space to ask them to God in prayer. Then I’ll pray for all of us and as you’re ready, you’re welcome to come forward to receive communion.

1. What do I want, as I begin this season of Advent?
2. Do my desires align with what God wants for me and for the world?
3. How can I commit to be aware of how God wants to shape my desires this Advent season?

God, you have gathered us to begin this season of Advent together. You spoke to us through your prophet, Isaiah. Like your people long ago, you call us to examine our hearts, to interrogate our desires. You ask us if our dreams for our lives, for our world, are big enough. Do we want good for all our neighbors? For the orphans and widows, the powerless among us? You call us to your table now, and we ask that, as we receive these wafers and juice, that they become a spiritual food for us. Glve us the grace we need to dream bigger dreams, to have stronger desires. To want what is right.

We offer these prayers and approach your table today in the name of your son, Jesus.

As you go today, take up the cause of the oppressed, and find hope that God is at work there and will one day restore everything.