

Welcome

Good morning everybody! My name is Ashley and I'm a part of the teaching team here at Catalyst. Today is the last Sunday of the year and about this time we normally look back on the past year and reflect on how things have changed or how we've grown. Today, though, is a particularly interesting Sunday because it happens to be the last Sunday of the entire decade. The reality of the end of the decade has caused lots of people to create "Best of" lists for the last 10 years. The "Top 10 best songs of the decade" list came out from multiple sites, donning songs like, "Royals" by Lorde and "All too Well" by Taylor Swift. Many sites also released a "Top 10 Best Movies of the Decade" list as well, which had movies like Big Hero 6 and Whiplash.

While we as a culture enjoy looking back on the good times of the past year or decade, lists have also popped up like, "10 worst songs of the decade," which include songs like, "Sexy and I know it" and "Blurred Lines." There were also the "10 worst movies of the decade," which included movies like, "Dark Tide," and "The Layover."

Many apps have also moved to make lists like this personalized. So, if you have an iPhone, your photos app will show you a video of "your year in review" using your pictures. Facebook shows you your year through your posts. And, if you use Spotify, then that app will even give a "Top Ten" lists of songs you seem to have loved this year.

We love to reflect on our last year for many reasons. For some of us, it's to see the growth. For others of us, it's to look back and see the changes that an entire year can hold. We look back and see all the change, both good and bad, and it helps us look at our situation and say, "this situation too is going to change in this next year or decade."

We look at all the differences from our past year or past decade and it helps us to imagine what the future could hold. We imagine all of our growth in the next year. We imagine all the good things that are to come, much like there were good things in this last year or in this last decade. What's cool is that this practice is also a spiritual practice. To reflect on how God has interacted in your world is something that takes faith because it grows our faith.

What we find in the end is that God's presence with us creates possibilities. God's interaction in our world has created new things, maybe changes from something old, or maybe new life, or maybe redemption in some relationship or other part of your life. God's interaction and presence with us throughout this past year created possibilities for us and those possibilities spurred on more possibilities and so on.

So, since it's something we're already doing at this point in the year, we're going to spend today imagining what the next year or next decade will look like, knowing that God's presence with us creates possibilities. So, let's begin by worshipping this God who is faithfully present with us and who is always working for our ultimate good.

Message:

Today is the 5th Day of Christmas. Christians all over the world spent the four weeks of Advent preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. And then on Christmas, Jesus came into the world - the hope of the future brought to physical reality. We now spend 12 days celebrating, asking what it *means* that Jesus is with us.

This year, our series is called Christmas is for Dreamers. With the help of the prophet Isaiah we're looking in the past at the faithfulness that God has shown us and we're allowing that reality to help us look forward and imagine the future. This is something that we're already doing when we read all of the Top 10 Best & Worst lists of this year or of the decade. Or when we look at what Spotify deems our most played songs to be.

This kind of cultural retrospection looks different for everybody. For some people, this was the best year/decade of your life so far. You love looking back at all the memories and seeing how different everything is because it's been awesome for you. Some people aren't interested in looking back on the year or decade, maybe because of some hurt or broken relationships. Or maybe some of us are hanging on by the skin of our teeth, just trying to get through as is. Maybe all you're doing is trying to make it to the new year, so looking back on this last one is the farthest thing from your mind.

[Scripture Slide 1] But this cultural retrospection isn't something that's new. In fact, the prophet Isaiah was doing it thousands of years ago. Today we're going to be in Isaiah 63, which is on page ___ in one of the free Bible in the back. If you picked up one of those and you need a Bible, please feel free to keep that one and consider it a gift from us.

At this point, Isaiah is at rock bottom. Isaiah is with all of you who are holding on by the skin of your teeth. For Isaiah, looking back on his "decade" is looking at the exile, where the entire ruling class - thousands of people - were killed or taken away to a different nation as slaves. That event was immense, not only for those taken into slavery, but also those left behind. Without anyone to lead them, those left behind were vulnerable.

Edom is a neighboring nation that had conflict with Israel and Judah that almost goes back to the time of Abram. Not only were there small fights between these two nations for many years, but Edom partnered with Assyria to aid them in the ransacking and ultimate exile that caused a cultural apocalypse for these people. Assyria ended up taking Edom anyways, but it is not far fetched for the people Isaiah is talking to to almost directly blame Edom for the situation they're in now because of Edom's participation in the devastation.

In the verses right before where we're going to pick up, Isaiah remembers Edom, or rather God reminds Isaiah of Edom. The first 6 verses of this chapter are presented as though God is speaking. He basically says, "do you remember Edom? I crushed them (he uses a winepress analogy). They were your enemies and I trampled them." God reminds Israel of their recent past and how He participated in that past.

And that brings us to the verses that we're about to read. As we read these verses, I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of Isaiah - he's at the rock bottom of rock bottom. There's very little hope within the Judean people because they can see their grim circumstances and they can't see any way out: they're a tiny nation that's just experience a cultural apocalypse caused by a much larger, more vicious nation. Their entire world has been upended and now they not only feel hopeless, but they don't even feel like they have any possibilities for the future:

We'll start in verse 7 --

I will tell of the Lord's unfailing love. I will praise the Lord for all he has done. 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

[Keep slide on screen] So, this is Isaiah's response to the situation at hand: our situation sucks. There's no getting around that. Feel through how much it sucks right now because that's the only way you'll be able to see what I see: that God will save us.

Yes, things are difficult right now, but Isaiah is confident that God will come through in a real way. And we know that God did. Christmas just happened - we celebrated God physically and personally coming into the world to rescue us.

Isaiah quotes God saying, "They are my very own people. Surely they will not betray me again." God looked at the people's past and saw who they were before, but God sees the road ahead of them as paved with new possibilities. So, He had mercy on them. And then God looks to the future, confident that God's own people would be different. And according to Isaiah, in that instant, God became their savior.

So, what does being our savior mean? Salvation looked very different for 6th century Judeans than it does for us. And even more than that - it looks different for me than it does for any one of you. What I think is important is that Isaiah shows us a pattern. God's pattern of salvation. And it goes like this: Step 1 - God sees our past and imagines new possibilities for our future. Step 2: God is present with us to help us enact those possibilities.

This pattern is all over the place. We see it in the Bible: God says to Abram, "You will be a great nation," yet Abram is 90 years old and has no children. God looks at Abram's past and sees his faithfulness. Then, God goes with Abram and he has a son and after many generations, they become the nation of Israel. God says to Moses, "Go and tell Pharaoh to let my people go," yet Moses isn't well spoken and is an outcast. God looks at Moses' past and sees a heartbroken person. So, God goes with Moses and he eventually leads God's people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into a land that they settled in. When Jesus called His 12 disciples, they were all outcasts: tax collectors, fishermen, etc. God saw their past full of hurt and social

impurity and yet, Jesus travelled with them and they became the ones to lead the Church after Jesus left.

In the late 300s, there was a man named Patrick, who was captured by pirates and taken to Ireland to be a slave. And after several years of being a slave, he finally escaped and went back home. And despite that, God came to him and said, “you will be a great shepherd of the Druids in Ireland.” And God went with him and he became St. Patrick, the most influential Christian to the Druids, eventually becoming ordained as a saint after his death. God saw his past and knew that that pain didn’t have to define him.

In the 1100s there was a man named Francis who was born into wealth and as he grew up, he became well known for his partying and drinking. God said to him: go and help the poor among you. God looked at his past and saw a wealthy and proud man and yet, God went with him and Francis, who later became St. Francis of Assisi, spent the rest of his life devoted to the poor. He left his wealth to live in poverty with those he cared for. After he passed away, he was deemed a saint and there is even an entire group of the Catholic church called “Franciscans” who are devoted to living like he did and doing the good work of Jesus.

In the 1900s there was a woman who felt called to be a nun, so at 18 she joined a group of nuns and traveled to India. And while in India, God came to her and said, “go and help those who nobody sees.” God looked at her past and her youth and naive-ness, but God went with her and this young woman named Teresa founded a group called “The Missionaries of Charity,” and they - led by the woman who would become known as Mother Teresa - helped the poor in India through famines, war, and death. She also became canonized as a Saint just a couple of years ago.

This is what salvation looks like. We see our past and all that God has done in our lives and then, God imagines possibilities for our lives and our world; possibilities that seem so far away, so inconceivable that sometimes we can’t see them. Then, God goes with us, and His presence enacts change.

And we need both steps because without God’s presence, change does not come. If we only see the possibilities, but there’s no presence, then there are 2 roads: Either you see the bar God has set for you and you know you can’t reach it, so you give up. Or, we try and affect our own change, which often doesn’t work because we often get stuck in places or habits or addictions that we can’t get out of by ourselves. What good are possibilities when faced with our very human, sometimes very broken realities?

In verse 9 Isaiah says, “**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 the years.**” This is the great news: God came to us. God came to those broken realities. In the birth of Jesus, God’s presence becomes real and tangible for us. At Christmas, God literally becomes GOD WITH US. And that creates possibilities for transformation in our lives.

And oftentimes, That's easy to miss because usually we're not looking for God in our past. This transforming reality is easy to miss because oftentimes we only spend time reflecting when we're going into a new year. But, Isaiah's model shows us to reflect on what God HAS done to see what God WILL do. And that means reflecting more often.

As I was preparing for today, I decided to create a "Top Ten" List for my year of what God has done or has begun to do in my world. (We're all still learning everything)

1. God has shown me how to communicate my problems better than I could last year.
2. God has helped me see my worth in relationships throughout this year.
3. God has helped me to see what faith looks like through multiple hospital visits this year.
4. God has shown me a love this year like I've never known.
5. I have been shown and failed and shown and failed at patience many times this year.
6. God has helped me learn to grieve the loss of relationships this year.
7. God has taught/is still teaching me how to listen this year.
8. God has shown me what bravery looks like, especially when stepping out of my comfort zone.
9. God has taught me/is teaching me what it looks like to care for myself.
10. Through all the change that this year has brought, God has taught me what hope truly looks like.

That's a lot of things in just one year. This list was difficult for me because it's been a very difficult year. It's tough to look back on that hurt. That's the main reason we don't look back on our past months or years. Or sometimes, we're just distracted. We have a very full schedule and we don't have time to think about what we're going to have for dinner tomorrow, let alone think about what this year held for us. But often, either mindset will keep us stuck in our same routines and it will keep us from setting aside the time it takes to be different.

When we reflect - when we look back on our year or our decade - it allows us to see where God is in our lives and all the things that have happened with His presence. That gives us hope because it shows us the multitude of possibilities that are ahead of us in the new year.

Communion

Reflection

Homework: create your own top 10 list - of either the year or the decade!