

Sunday 5th December 2021
Isaiah 9:6-7 & 2 Corinthians 4:5-12
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Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Holy Spirit, please come among us and reveal to us the way of our Heavenly Father.

Holy Spirit, please be present and reveal to us the hope we have through Jesus.

Come now Holy Spirit we pray, with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen

I wonder what kind of person are you when it comes to the Christmas lists and the buying of Christmas presents? Are you a person who enjoys surprises for your Christmas presents? or Do you write a list and give that to family and friends saying I'd like something from this? I'm going to give you 20 to 30 seconds just to talk about that with your neighbour if you feel able. Are you a surprise kind of person or not? Over to you.

Okay, dokey. So, hands up if you're a surprise kind of person? Are you. Who's the surprise kind? I think you might be in the minority not by much but I think it would seem like a that. So, the rest of you might be a bit like me. If there's something I really want then I do probably have an idea of what I'm after, if it's a piece of tech, if it's a piece of (Andrew could we just turn that down a tad) sorry, if it's a piece of tech or a piece of gear I probably know what I want but there is also something nice about receiving those surprise Christmas presents. Isn't there?

Last year's one, the funny one that Gill gave me that I think I showed, the baldy Christmas mug that I received, I really like that, it's one of the ones I really like, so it gave me a good laugh, and I think we also had a laugh because I think I showed it on the Christmas day service. So I do like a bit of a surprise but Christmas presents is not the only things where a surprise can happen.

Life also has its surprises and more often than not the surprises that come with life are not often the good ones, they're hard and they can leave us feeling in a really difficult place, a really hard place. The biggest one obviously we've all had to be dealing with is coronavirus and it's ongoing twists and turns but maybe this past year for you has brought other surprises. Maybe surprises with health, maybe surprises of relationships, maybe at work or friends or family, a loss you've experienced. Who knows where the surprise may be but I'm sure all of us can resonate with it to some degree. All of us will have experienced that unexpected event that was just not welcome, it was not a positive surprise like on Christmas day, and maybe as you approach Advent this year you're carrying some of that with you, and so you don't approach Advent this year with anticipation or peace or joy, but rather something else and maybe when you were hearing of Sharon's testimony last week on the one hand you're really encouraged that God is that companion and He's ready to give wisdom but maybe hearing that testimony on the other hand brought to mind unanswered prayers that you've got in your life and you struggle with that and it just brings that to mind for you as you heard that 'Why, God, are you not answering my prayers?'

And so, as we said last week, we're beginning this new series where we're digging into this familiar passage in Isaiah chapter 9 where we read of these four titles of Jesus because it's so easy just to skip over those four titles and not really grasp maybe something of what they're trying to communicate to us. And so, last week, we did see that Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise made in Isaiah but this week we're going to see that He fulfills the second title in a very surprising way. Isaiah said 'For to us a child is born and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And so, what does it mean that Jesus is Mighty God? What does that mean?

Well, *mighty* in the Old Testament has connotations of military prowess, of being bold and brave, and so it conveys this idea of someone who has the power to resist every evil or threat and he's able to make his people safe, particularly the kings would be thought of in that way, and so it's quite natural that a Zionist prophecy speaks also of Midian which was an event in the history of Israel where Israel faced this threat that was described as being so numerous it was like a 'plague of locusts descending upon the land' and you can read about that in Judges chapter 6. But Israel did defeat them, they defeated a foe of 120 thousand enemies and there's that encouragement in Isaiah's day as they face the threat from Assyria and a numerous enemy as well. There's Isaiah to bring that encouragement that the Mighty God is on their side and so they should trust in Him, they should wait upon Him, they should wait for His promise to be fulfilled. But, as we saw last week, that this promise can't be just fulfilled in one particular person, can be fulfilled in the normal kings, that there's this echo, this sign, that it would be a divine person and no king up until Jesus fulfilled fully those expectations.

And so, we've read of incidents like in Mark 2 where Jesus healed the paralytic and the paralytic was able to stand and pick up His mat and walk out the door, and as people saw that, they were just wowed with awe, that here was someone who had the power of God and could heal in such incredible manner. Or the incident in Mark 6 where Jesus is in the boat with the disciples and He's sleeping in the in the back but then the storm comes and the disciples are so scared that they think they're going to drown and so they wake up Jesus and He gets up and He simply says 'Be still' and everything died down.

And what does, what do they say? How? Here is one who even the winds and the waves obey him? such is His power, such is His authority. And because Jesus kept doing all these things, people expected Him to be this Messiah that they had anticipated, that Isaiah had promised, and so they expect Him to come and to rule in might and power and to kick out the Romans and re-establish the political kingdom of Israel and bring back the glory days where they would rule their land and everything would be perfect and good once more. And so, they want to establish Him as their king but Jesus wasn't there to establish a political kingdom, He was there to exert His power in a different way and in a surprising way, a way that even confounded people and along the journey of time through His ministry He shared, began to share with His disciples that He would go to die on a cross and they couldn't take that in. How could

God, how could our Messiah die? and it baffled His disciples, it baffled people later when He did die, it baffled people afterwards and as the church began to share that message that God had come as a babe at Christmas and when He grew, He then went and died on a cross.

It was too much for some and so as Paul says in the first letter to Corinthians 'Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.' Jesus came exerting His power in an unexpected way, in a way that confounded people, that just seemed like foolishness, it was a blocker for some to faith in Him but maybe, if they had remembered the story of Midian more fully, they might have remembered, might have struggled less with that because Gideon is the one who was used of God to secure Israel's safety and salvation but he says to the Lord when the Lord comes to him in the form of an angel he says 'How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family.'

The people of God are led into salvation through an insignificant individual, a person who's weak, who displayed nothing of power or might. And, what is more, do you remember how many the Lord used to defeat 120,000? 300, 300 Israelites is what He used to defeat 120,000. He used weakness, He used insignificance, He used limitation to achieve His purposes and so for the people in Isaiah's day and the people in the time of Jesus, even in our day, we expect God to exert His power, His might in a particular way, we expect it to be through strength and dominion and force. God often doesn't work that way. He has the power over our sickness and nature in the demonic for sure as we saw in the life of Jesus, but ultimately, He just chose to display His power in weakness, in death and being born as a babe and growing as a man and living a human life in the midst of that. That's how He ultimately displayed He was Mighty God.

And so, maybe the Advent message for us this year is that, that God will rescue, He will save His people, nothing can thwart His plans because He is Mighty God. But maybe He displays His power in a way we don't expect, is through limitation, the limitation of the incarnation of becoming human and in the limitation of death. Maybe there's an invitation this Advent for us to have our picture of God changed, to go maybe deeper and have a more surprising understanding of God rather than us casting God in the image that we would want. Maybe we allow Him to shape our perspective of Him through His word.

And so, if Jesus is the Mighty God and displays His power in surprising ways, in ways that we don't expect, naturally that we'd rather He didn't, we'd rather He just conformed to what we expect this Mighty God to do. If He doesn't do that, if He's constantly just inviting us into an alternative perspective of Him what should be our response to that? How should we respond to this Mighty God revealing Himself in weakness and limitation?

Well, I said last week that the chapters of Isaiah 8 and 9 run very closely together and we read a little bit at the end of chapter 8 last week but this week I'd like to read a little

bit earlier in Isaiah because Isaiah says this 'This is what the Lord says to me warning me not to follow the way of this people. Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy. Do not fear what they fear and do not dread it.' Is that making you worry about conversations we've heard around the coronavirus and all that's just the way aside the Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. He is the one you are to fear - I will wait for the Lord. I will put my trust in Him.

Isaiah is sent to people facing overwhelming odds, an overwhelming threat and he is sent to them to call them to trust Him, to trust Him when it looks like all the odds are against you and the future is bleak and you feel in darkness and gloom. He sent to call them to trust in the Lord rather than trust in other sources of power or wisdom, other places that we might look to for our salvation. Trust in the Lord is his message because here is the promising it goes into Isaiah 9 there to trust and to keep on trusting.

And the same was true in Paul's day. Paul, we know from what we read earlier, they would say that for God who said 'Let light shine out of darkness', the God who created all things and said 'Let there be light and suddenly there was light' this God has made His light shine in our hearts to give us the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. Basically, when you see Jesus, you see this God who created all things. God has come in human form. That was their testimony, crazy as it sounded, and yet that early church was hard-pressed, they were perplexed, persecuted, struck down, they faced such hard times as we have never known for generations, and it raised difficult questions.

People began to wonder 'Is Jesus really this Mighty God?' because in the culture of the time if you claim that your God was the Mighty God and the strongest God then you should be safe, you should be the one in control and dominion, and so the Roman Gods they were the powerful Gods, because the Romans were in power and there was all these claims about who is the most powerful God and because Christians suffered there was questions about 'Well, is Jesus really this Mighty God? Has he really secured salvation and victory?' and so, they began to circulate false claims about Jesus. There began to be others who would deny Jesus and forsake Jesus yet, what is Paul's response, this man who was persecuted, this man who eventually gave his life for the sake of Jesus, what's his response?

Well, in the next couple of verses he goes on to 'It is written 'I believed therefore I have spoken'. Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak. Because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself, since we have that same spirit of faith.' We have that same spirit of faith. Paul adopts a posture of faith, of trust, of holding on and trust to Jesus, and maybe the invitation for us is to do likewise this Advent. That in all the difficulties you face this year, know the difficulties you maybe continue to face even now, as you look at Advent and it's not for you a season of joy, maybe the invitation is simply to trust, to trust in this Jesus and not allow fear and not allow darkness to turn you away from Jesus, to rather press you deeper into Him and to wait upon Him because that is what Isaiah also said he said 'I will wait for the Lord' and

you're trusting. Wait for the Lord. Wait for Him to act in his way and in His timing rather than in the way you expect or want God to do. Trust in Him. Wait upon Him. Maybe that's the first invitation in response to Jesus being our Mighty God?

Our reading from second Corinthians does however give us a second possible response this morning and earlier we read in first second Corinthians 'we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body for we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus sake so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body so then death is at work in us but life is at work in you.'

And these words of Paul and indeed in his life and ministry, there was this example, this calling to give your life for the sake of Jesus for His purposes, for His priorities, for His people, to give yourself, to die to self. But Paul was just echoing Jesus wasn't he? Because Jesus said 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save their life, will lose it but whoever loses their life for me, and for the gospel, will save it.'

Again, the same echo, the same idea. Give your life away. If Jesus is truly this Mighty God and if you trust in Him, then in a dark times, wait and the rest of life even now in the dark times follow Him, give your life for Him, give your life for His purposes and priorities, make Him known, care for His church, advance His kingdom.

And so, maybe the invitation this Advent for you is to do that. To give yourself , just as Paul did in the face of persecution and ridicule. Paul continued to hold on to Jesus, to trust in Jesus, to give his life for Jesus, to follow the way of Jesus and that's so counter-cultural in our day because in our day we just want what benefits us, we don't want a religion that is costly but actually in dying to self, there's a thing of beauty, there's a thing of beauty.

Last week I mentioned that I recently went on retreat and whilst there was prayer walking not only did I receive from the Lord, things that I mentioned last week that really helped to heal some wounds, I also was struck by this scene so I was walking around the the walled garden and I was looking up and looking out for how the Lord would speak to me and this scene just captured my attention. Now, what tree do you think captured my attention from that view? The one in the middle, the big golden one. It was, that was the one that captured my attention. Not the kind of sparse looking drab one on the right. Not even that lush kind of ever-greeny one - that was kind of boring. The one in the middle, this auburn autumn leafed tree is the one that captured my attention. It was beautiful and just appreciating it and taking the time to marvel at it was a real gift to my soul and to my spirit. But here's the thing, that tree is only that way because the leaves are dying. It was through death that I received life, just by admiring that tree and they are dying so as to bring life in the next season.

It's the same principle in God's wired into creation that when we die to self, there can be life for others

And I wonder what that looks like this Advent season for you as you follow in the way of Jesus, as you say 'Well Jesus is the Mighty God and I follow Him and that means I've to die to self as He died for me?' He didn't come just to have a nice wee Advent scene, He came as a babe for a purpose and that purpose was to die for you and me, to walk the way of the cross. And we, likewise, are called to walk a similar way. What does that look like for you this Advent?

There's so many examples and ideas and I'm just going to pick two but think about where else it could apply in your life, maybe in your home life, in your family life, in your relationships, in your workplace, but I want to pick two just as we examples.

You hopefully received if you're a member three or four of these Christmas cards to invite people to Christmas services and hear the good news about a God who loved them that He came into the brokenness of this world. Have you given them away yet? Because, sometimes our embarrassment and our fear holds us back but dying to self would encourage us to get over that embarrassment, to not let that hold us back that we would care more for others than for our own image and reputation, that we'd be willing to take that step of faith and say 'Hey, my church has done some events this Christmas, do you fancy coming along?' It's a wee silly way but it is the same principle because who knows what you doing that will lead in the life of another, who knows if that invitation will lead to them coming to know Jesus and that would be a thing of beauty, a thing of beauty.

You'll also know that over this past year I've mentioned it in a number of sermons and in Bright Lights articles and letters to our members directly that we're having conversations about the future shape of the Braes churches, that there needs to be the closure of some buildings, and I wonder what this principle of following Jesus and dying to self would say to us? Is it possible that closing some churches, so as to sustain other places of mission, might be a dying to self that is beautiful?

There are so many ways that this principle is relevant as we finish off this year and head into a new year and so I encourage you to take some time to think that through, to think through where is this truth, this revelation that God is the Mighty God revealed in Jesus. He reveals it in startling, surprising ways and yet, we are called then to trust Him, to trust Him in the waiting and trust Him by following in His way, in His example. I pray it may be so for each and all of us, Amen