

Sermon: "Recounting our blessings"

Scriptures: Isaiah 63:7-9, Hebrews 2:10-18

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Our first reading is from Isaiah 63:7-9. Listen to the Word of God from Prophet Isaiah.

⁷ I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,
because of all that the LORD has done for us,
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that the Lord has shown them according to Lord's mercy,
according to the abundance of Lord's steadfast love.

⁸ For the Lord said, "Surely they are my people,
children who will not deal falsely";
and God became their savior

⁹ in all their distress.

It was no messenger or angel
but God's presence that saved them;
in God's love and in God's pity God redeemed them;
God lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Today's second reading comes from Hebrews 2:10-18. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

¹⁰ It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹ For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹² saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

¹³ And again,

“I will put my trust in God.”

And again,

“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

¹⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶ For it is clear that Jesus did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because Jesus himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Sermon: "Recounting our blessings"

Text: For it is clear that Jesus did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham." Hebrews 2:16

Let us pray: Dear God, as we celebrate your son's birth, let us recount the blessings that we have been given. Bless us this morning, soften our hearts, be present in every word that is spoken in this room that we may magnify your glory that is present in our lives. May the words of my mouth and meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you this morning, amen.

There is something powerful about being in between times.

Like being in the eye of the hurricane, there is a time of peace and tranquility while anticipating the brute force of nature's second punch of one-two combo.

There is something powerful about being in between times.

Like a boxer taking a breather and getting a quick triage for the cuts and bruises of the battle between the rounds while strategizing the next moves to knock out the opponent.

There is something powerful about being in between times.

So there is something powerful about today, being a day between Christmas – when we either experienced or witnessed the mighty strength of joy as a child ripping through the carefully wrapped presents, and the coming new year – when people will gather in cities and homes counting down the final seconds to usher in the new adventures and hopes. It is a peaceful time of the year, a needed break from festivities to reflect on the past year and to contemplate on the future. We look back to where we have been and what we have accomplished as well as looking forward to where we are going and plan how we are going to get there.

Israelites were in a similar situation in today's Isaiah passage, being placed in between times from their exile in Babylon and chartering a new beginning for the families to create the city of David. Imagine with me, what Israelites had to endure. They were once a nation of great wealth and power. During the time of King David and Solomon, they were the envy of the region. Now as a prisoner of war and many who were born in the foreign land of Babylon, only carried with them the stories of what once was Jerusalem, a city on the hill. They did not falter to worship the other gods of Babylon during the time of captivity, and they had to endure the treacherous journey of marching back to their homeland. At their return, they witnessed a city of rubble, as if a violent hurricane has ripped through the town. As they found themselves in the middle of the storm, they were comforted knowing that they are back in their homeland, but also knew that they had to endure another hard season to restore the city.

It would be easy for the Israelites to look at their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual scars and focus on the negative as it reminded them of the hard times during exile. They were mistreated, segregated, and faced injustice at every turn. No one would have blamed them if they decided to be mad at the situation, have doubts of their faith, and walked away from Jerusalem to start new somewhere else. Sometimes it is easier to skip the cleaning-up the mess or pick-up the broken pieces and simply start new elsewhere. The world has not changed much since the time of prophet Isaiah and we are living in our own cycle of personal trials and exiles. We have our own battle wounds of our hearts and minds, and face many challenges ahead in our relationships, finances, careers, health, and for some – even faith.

Sometimes, however, being in the middle of times brings out power and strength residing in each of us. Rather than walking off and turning away after seeing the rubble and brokenness, some choose to dig deep and do a careful inspection and reflection of who they are. Rather than falling into the devil's trick of thinking 'what-if's and how we got here, some begin to ask the question of "why" through the lens of faith. Let me explain little bit of what I just said. Take Christmas for an example. The world or the devil wants us to focus on **how** Jesus was born rather than **why** Jesus was born. It is rather easy for us to fall into the trap of celebrating the birth of baby Jesus through a nativity story (*how*) than taking it in and deeply reflect on *why* Jesus had to be born in a manger in Bethlehem – that he was born in order to save a wretch like me, to tap me out in order to take my spot on the cross, to die in order to defeat my death, to be resurrected in order that I too may be brought into new life, to be my savior in order to call me his own.

Today is a good time to be a live and be a Christian because we are living in the middle of times. We are living in the between times of when Jesus the Christ was born and the promised second coming of Christ. We are living in the between times of when God solely reigned before the creation and when God will solely reign once again among the creation. We are living in the between times as God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Hence, we too, have the power and strength residing in each of us through the power of the Holy Spirit. With God's help we can look past the negative and mend our brokenness brick-by-brick with God and with one another. We, the people of faith, must walk, talk, and live out our lives with a higher calling: to be strong and courageous, to love your enemies, and to shine forth God's perpetual light unto others.¹ Look at what Israelites ultimately decide to do according to today's reading:

⁷ I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,
because of all that the LORD has done for us,...
that the Lord has shown them according to Lord's mercy,

¹ Joshua 1:9, Matthew 5:44, Matthew 13:43

according to the abundance of Lord's steadfast love.
⁸ For the Lord said, "Surely they are my people...
and God became their savior
⁹ in all their distress.
It was no messenger or angel
but God's presence that saved them;
in God's love and in God's pity God redeemed them;
God lifted them up and carried them all the days...

They looked back and recounted their blessings. They "RE – membered" the broken memories of God's faithfulness: God's mercy, steadfast love, and most importantly that they are God's people, chosen by God.

Friends, we, too, are chosen child of God. It was God who reached out with God's righteous righthand² whenever we needed help; it was God who loved us first; it is God who never leaves us; it is God who will answer, find, open the doors whenever we ask, seek, and knock. God so desperately wanted to let us know that God is Immanuel – God with us – that God sent God's only begotten son, not as angel but as a man. Let me wrap this sermon with this illustration: shorter version of a Christmas story with no author, but told by Paul Harvey – The Man and the Birds

"I'm truly sorry to upset you," he told his wife, "but I'm not going with you to church this Christmas Eve." He said he'd feel like a hypocrite. That he'd much rather just stay at home, but that he would wait up for them. So he stayed while his family went to the midnight service.

Shortly after the family drove away, snow began to fall. Settling in his chair with a cup of coffee, the man began to relax for the evening when he heard an irregular thumping sound. At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window.

But when he went out to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm and, in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window. He couldn't leave the stranded birds to freeze, and remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter, if he could direct the birds to it. Quickly he bundled up and trudged through the snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light, but the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them. So he hurried back to the house, fetched breadcrumbs, sprinkled them on the snow. He made a trail to the brightly lit wide open doorway of the stable. To his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs, and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow.

He tried catching them. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms. But they scattered in every direction, except into the warm, lighted barn. And then he realized that they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying

² Matthew 25:31-33 – when the Son of Man comes in his glory... he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me... that I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them.

"If only I could be a bird," he thought to himself, "and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see, and hear, and understand."

At that moment, the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sound of the wind. And he stood listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. And he sank to his knees in the snow.³

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶For it is clear that Jesus did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. (Hebrews 2:14-16)

Amen.

³ shorten the story from the manuscript on these websites:
<https://townhall.com/columnists/michaelschaus/2014/12/25/paul-harveys-christmas-story-the-man-and-the-birds-n1935470>; <https://www.manandthebirds.com/>