

Betting Warmth Against the Cold

Isaiah 11:1-9

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 24, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his
mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the
wicked.
⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the
asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the
adder's den.
⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the
Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:1-9, NRSV)

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This past Tuesday morning I was out walking along the river with my dog, Cooper, very early just before the sun came up. There were clouds to the east which made me suspect I was in for a beautiful sunrise. I was not disappointed. It turned out to be one of the most brilliant sunrises I have ever seen – though I have to admit that's not saying a whole lot as I didn't see many sunrises the first 40 years of my life. The problem was that they always seem to happen so dang early in the morning. In recent years, however, I've become more of a morning person and have grown to appreciate sunrises, especially in the cold of winter when the colors somehow seem move vivid. Last Tuesday was one the best I've seen. And I timed it right. Nothing worse

than walking outside and seeing the last remnants of a sunrise or sunset you knew must have been beautiful to behold if you'd only been outside ten minutes earlier. Not this time. I watched it emerge.

The beauty literally stopped me in my tracks. I stood there for a few minutes on top of the levee, speechless, in awe really of the sky above me. The words of the Psalmist came to mind: "**The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.**"¹ But then, nearly as quickly as the beauty had emerged, it faded away. I knew, of course, that it would. I didn't expect the sunrise to last all day. In fact, as soon as I realized it was going to be an exceptionally beautiful sunrise, a sadness came over me because I knew the beauty was going to be short-lived.

Such is life.

My experience on the river last Tuesday morning is an experience I've seen repeated in my life over and over and over again. I suspect you have as well. There is such goodness in this life, moments we wish we could freeze in time, moments when everything seems to be exactly as it was meant to be, satisfying and complete. But those moments never last. You know it as well as I know it. Think about the best moments in your life. Hasn't every single one of those moments faded too quickly?

One writer captures it all this way:

Vacations are always too short, always less than ideal. Dream homes have problems, sometimes nightmarish – leaky pipes, creaky joists, faulty wires, cracking foundations. Good health is hard to maintain and snatched away at the whim of some rogue gene or sudden mishap or stray virus. Community is fragile, and even amid close friends we feel a little lonely.²

Perhaps there is no other season of the year when this truth is highlighted as much as it is at Christmas. Everywhere we have turned for the last nearly two months we have been presented with pictures of what has always been advertised as most wonderful time of

¹ Psalm 19:1, NIV

² Mark Buchannan, *The Rest of God* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), 215.

the year. “With the kids jingle belling, and everyone telling you be of good cheer! It's the most wonderful time of the year.” And often times it can be. I have always loved Christmas. But even so, I also know that even Christmas never quite seems to fully deliver.

As a kid, often the best part of getting presents under the tree was actually the anticipation. Sometimes the thrill of a new toy lasted for a while, but it always wore off, sometimes by the next morning! And things haven't changed all that much as I've grown older. This season there have already been wonderfully cherished moments with family and friends finally gathered together again, times in worship with my church family, opportunities to rehearse old holiday traditions, celebrations around tables full of good food and good drink. It's good. It really is. But all of it fades. Presents are forgotten. People travel back home. Traditions often don't generate that same feeling they once did. And when the feast is over a pile of dirty dishes always awaits.

John Mayer is one of my favorite contemporary musicians. I'm not sure what he believes when it comes to matters of faith, but in at least one of his songs, entitled *Something's Missing*, he perfectly captures this sense of dissatisfaction we all come across in life.

*I'm not alone
I wish I was
'Cause then I'd know I was down because
I couldn't find a friend around
To love me like they do right now*

*I'm dizzy from the shopping mall
I searched for joy, but I bought it all
It doesn't help the hunger pains
And a thirst I'd have to drown first to ever satiate*

It's good, right. I mean, there is so much good in life. And yet, there's always something missing.

In his book entitled *Simply Christian*, Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright imagines this scenario. One day a collector is rummaging through a dusty old attic in a small Austrian town and comes across a faded manuscript containing many pages of music. It's piano music. Immediately he takes it to a dealer who, in turn, phones a friend, an expert in this sort of thing. Upon seeing the music for himself, the expert becomes excited and puzzled all at once. The handwriting on the pages matches that of Mozart himself, but the music is unknown. It doesn't correspond to any of Mozart's known works.

Before long somebody is seated at a piano, trying to pluck out the notes on the page. Everybody present is stunned because the music is beautiful, just the sort of thing Mozart would have written. It's energetic but sorrowful; it's got subtle harmonic shifts, some splendid melodies, and a ringing finale. And yet, something's missing. The music seems incomplete. There are places where nothing much happens, where the piano seems only to be marking time. At other places the writing is faded and it's not quite clear what exactly the composer had intended.

Gradually everybody realizes what it is they have before them. This is, indeed, Mozart. And it is, indeed, hauntingly beautiful. But the music is only the piano part which was meant to accompany another instrument, maybe many instruments. An oboe or bassoon, maybe a violin or cello. By itself, the music is frustratingly incomplete, only a signpost to something that was there once and might still turn up one day. If only those other parts could be found, they would make complete sense of the incomplete beauty contained in these faded scribbles of genius.³

Wright goes on to say that we live in a world where we all eventually realize something is missing. We have before us in this life mere echoes of something we can't seem to ever experience fully, or at least experience in a lasting way. Specifically, he names four echoes. We hear an echo of justice. We know what is right in the world and what should be right, but justice so often slips through our fingers. We hear an echo of spirituality. Something in us insists that what we see is not all there is. We hear an echo of community. In your mind you have a picture of the way relationships are supposed to work and yet even our best relationships always come up short. And finally, we hear an echo of beauty. The sunrise before us is often incomplete and always fleeting.

When the Bible speaks of this incompleteness and finiteness it always points back to human sin as the root cause. Because we have turned our backs on our Creator, insisted on living life on our terms rather than his terms, all of creation – not only us, but the world itself – has paid the price. In Romans 8 Paul declares that “**the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.**” The world is in “**bondage to decay**”, he says, groaning “**as in the pains of childbirth**” as it waits to be set free.⁴ Think about that for a minute. Creation itself knows that something is missing.

³ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (Harper, 2006), 39-40.

⁴ Romans 8:20-22

In response we often try to hold on to whatever glimmers of justice, spirituality, community and beauty which come our way. But then when we find we can't hold on, we try to go back and recover. One Christmas we have an experience that is wonderful and so we resolve, next Christmas, to repeat the experience, to make it a tradition. But does it work? Sometimes. Sort of. But is it ever really the same? Think back to some special place from your childhood – a house that once was full of people you loved and who loved you, or a vacation spot which brings to mind happy memories, or a park or restaurant where true love for you first blossomed. We can sometimes physically return to those places, those very same places, but chances are we won't be able to recapture the memories or recreate the experiences. Sometimes those places don't even exist anymore. At some point somebody came along and bulldozed the whole thing and put up a strip mall.

Looking back, or trying to get back, never satisfies, at least not for very long. It seems, therefore, that we have no choice but to look somewhere else other than backwards.

Recently I read a very unique definition of faith, one that I'd never before considered. In this book, *The Rest of God*, writer Mark Buchanan defines faith this way: "Faith is a tenacious conviction that this world is not enough and was never intended to be." He goes on to say that faith is the stubborn refusal to seek ultimate things – ultimate pleasure, ultimate fulfillment, ultimate purpose, ultimate understanding – in places where God has not laid these things.⁵

We live in a world that is consumed by consumerism. We want more, bigger, faster, better, shinier, longer-lasting. But even when we get these things they fall short. Something is always missing. It always eventually leaves us restless, thirsty, aching, lost, incomplete and unsatisfied. It often sets off to chase after even more, bigger, faster, better, shinier, longer-lasting. In the words of the great poet Oscar Wilde, the world is "exquisite, yet leaves us unsatisfied." But if we keep looking to the world, keep looking back to try to recover what for a moment once was, we will find it all, even in the moment, slipping through our fingers and, as a result, we will sink even deeper into our dissatisfaction. Ultimate things are not laid up in this world. That means that the restlessness we feel is not a fault in our faith, but the *substance* of our faith! That restlessness is supposed to make us lean forward to our true home, to the life for which we were ultimately made, a life which can only be experienced in fading

echoes this side of eternity. As Buchanan puts it, "God lets us groan now to woo us heavenward."

The passage we just read from Isaiah 11, full of stunningly beautiful imagery, is meant to do exactly that, to woo us heavenward. First written to Israel at a desperate time when they longed for God to bring them home, it continues to speak with equal power and hope to us today, to those of us here who also ache to go home. Look at the passage with me again.

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Long before Jesus was ever born, God made a covenant, a promise, with King David, the son of Jesse from Bethlehem, that in the fullness of time God would raise up from David's line a King, an eternal King, who would come as Messiah and set things right. That night in Bethlehem, in the city of David, when Mary gave birth to her newborn son and laid him in a feeding trough in the back of a borrowed stable, the tiny shoot emerged from the old stump. In time as the child grew into a man it became clear that the Spirit of the Lord did rest on him – wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord together. He did not take things as he found them in the world, but saw beyond, declaring that the poor were richly blessed, those who mourn comforted, the meek in possession of an unbelievable inheritance, the hungry and thirsty satisfied, the merciful shown grace, the pure in heart in fellowship with God, the peacemakers adopted as the very children of God.⁶

The vision given here is stunning. The wolf will romp with the lamb, the leopard sleep with the kid. The calf and the lion eat from the same trough, both tended by a child. Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill for the whole world will know God because God will be there to be known, as completely as the waters now cover the face of the sea.⁷ The vision is almost too beautiful to be believed, a rumor that seems simply too good to be true.

Mark Tootle recently shared with the rest of our staff his favorite Christmas song from last year. The song is called "Snow" and it's written and recorded by a band named *Sleeping at Last*. Like was the case with John Mayer, I'm not sure the faith perspective behind the song. It's not overtly Christian. But the themes get at the heart of the message I'm trying to share with you today. So much so, I want you to listen to the song in its entirety.

⁶ See Matthew 5:3-9.

⁷ I'm borrowing some language here from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this passage in *The Message*.

⁵ Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God*, 214.

*The branches have traded their leaves for white sleeves
All warm-blooded creatures make ghosts as they breathe
Scarves are wrapped tightly like gifts under trees
Christmas lights tangle in knots annually*

*Our families huddle closely
Betting warmth against the cold
But our bruises seem to surface
Like mud beneath the snow*

*So we sing carols softly, as sweet as we know
A prayer that our burdens will lift as we go
Like young love still waiting under mistletoe
We'll welcome December with tireless hope*

*Let our bells keep on ringing
Making angels in the snow
May the melody disarm us
When the cracks begin to show*

*Like the petals in our pockets
May we remember who we are
Unconditionally cared for
By those who share our broken hearts*

*The table is set and our glasses are full
Though pieces go missing, may we still feel whole
We'll build new traditions in place of the old
'Cause life without revision will silence our souls*

*So let the bells keep on ringing
Making angels in the snow
May the melody surround us
When the cracks begin to show*

*Like the petals in our pockets
May we remember who we are
Unconditionally cared for
By those who share our broken hearts*

*As gentle as feathers, the snow piles high
Our world gets rewritten and retraced every time
Like fresh plates and clean slates, our future is white
New year's resolutions will reset tonight*

There are so many images here which vividly capture the incompleteness and dissatisfaction we feel in life, feelings which are often highlighted this time of year when the expectation for something more reaches a fevered pitch. We put our polished Christmas best on the front of the Christmas card, but in reality there are bruises beneath the surface, some fresh, like the mud beneath the snow.

And yet, at Christmas, as much as any time of year, we bet warmth against the cold with tireless hope. Like petals in our pockets, we remember who we are. And who are we? We are unconditionally cared for by One who has, in every way and to the fullest extent, shared our broken hearts. This is the hope of Christmas, and not just Christmas but of life. The echoes tell the story. The rumors are true. The ache we feel when the best in life fades away so quickly is there for a reason. The restlessness we live with is not a fault of faith, but faith's substance, pushing us forward.

When the child was born that dark night in Bethlehem, the very God of the universe, the Creator of all that is, set aside everything ultimate and entered into finite creation itself, stooping low enough to actually become one of us. And not just one of us, but one of the least of us. Born to peasants, mired in a life of poverty, abandoned and deserted by those closest to him, executed a condemned criminal, buried in a borrowed grave. Do you understand that in Christ, God himself became despised and rejected, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief? He carried our heaviest burdens and was crushed for our sin.⁸ In Christ, God emptied himself for our sakes, gave his life so we could live.

The other night I sat in my truck at a stoplight and watched as a homeless man pushed all his earthly belongings in a shopping cart through the crosswalk in front of me and walked off into what promised to be a dark, cold night. As I watched him go I found myself wondering, as I've wondered before, what it would be like to sleep on the streets in December, or at any time of year for that matter. I've met lots of people who are homeless in my life, even talked to some of them about their experience. And so maybe I have a vague idea of what that man was going to face that night. But to really know his place in life I'd have to join him, and not just for a night, but join him on the streets for as long as he was on the streets, giving up everything I have, including even the possibility of gaining back everything I have. Only then could I really begin to know his place.

I'll never be able to explain this to you in a way that will make complete sense because, frankly, it all doesn't make complete sense to me. But this is, nonetheless, the heart of the good news of Christmas. God, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, immersed himself fully in this broken, tired world, even to the point of death, so that in taking on all that is missing in this world he might not only share our pain but make a way for us to eventually find our way out of it.

⁸ See Isaiah 53:3-5.

“Life without revision will silence our souls.” That’s what the song says. And it’s true. If this is all there is, if justice is never going to be fully realized, and what we see in this world is really all we ever get, and deep and abiding love and friendship always fall short, and the beauty of the sunrise is always going to fade, then our souls are silenced. But they are not silenced. Life is not without revision, and renewal, and healing, and restoration. For the One who bore all our brokenness, even to death, did not stay dead. He rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven. He has promised to return. And when he does we will find that all the rumors are indeed true.

C.S. Lewis once wrote,

If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy, but only to arouse, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same.

In light of the hope that we have in what is to come, take delight in the gifts of this season and beyond. Delight in your children and your grandchildren, in your family gathered together. Take delight in traditions rooted in cherished memories. Take delight in tables overflowing with good food and good drink, encircled with friends you love or, better yet, friends you like and enjoy. Savor while it lasts the explosion of color in the clouds on a cool, crisp December morning. Pause in wonder as you light a candle Christmas Eve and sing Silent Night with your church family. Relish in the joy of a gift thoughtfully given out of love.

Yes, it’s true, all these things will fade. You already know they will. Some, even in the moment, won’t live up to the hype. Even the parts of this season you find exquisite will ultimately not satisfy. But do not despair. Take delight in them but don’t try to hold on as they fade. Let them go without more than a backward glance. And then look forward. In faith and hope look beyond. Look mostly to Christ, the one who has shared your broken heart, the one who, in time, will come again. In that day, you will find hope realized, and life revised and made new, and faith transformed to sight, and prayer giving way to praise. Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Isaiah 11:1-9. What do you notice here in the brilliant imagery of this prophesy?
2. Where is the hope in this text? Where do you find hope here?
3. Describe a moment or occasion in life recently which was, for you, “as good as it gets”. What made that moment or occasion so good?
4. When Christmas is all over are you usually satisfied? Or do you find yourself some years left with a sense of discontentment, even disappointment. Why is this?
5. The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning once penned these words: “Earth’s crammed with heaven // And every common bush afire with God // But only he who sees takes off his shoes // The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.” Can you relate? Is earth crammed with heaven? When has “God afire” around you caused you to realize you are on holy ground?
6. Author and pastor Mark Buchannan writes, “Faith is a tenacious conviction that this world is not enough and was never intended to be.” What does this mean to you? Is our faith really rooted in the realization that we will never find what is ultimate here on earth and so we must keep our eyes fixed beyond the finite?
7. The song *Snow* declares that “life without revision will silence our souls.” What does this lyric mean to you? Why might our souls long for life to be made new?
8. What does Christmas mean to you? What does it *mean* that the Son of God was born in Bethlehem?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why was Jesus born?

How would our world be different if Jesus was never born?