

Needing a Gift

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part series

November 27, 2011

©2011 Scott L. Engle

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NRSV)

- ¹ O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
- ² as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
- ³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
- ⁴ From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
- ⁵ You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
- ⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
- ⁷ There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
- ⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
- ⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)

- ⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
- ⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
- ⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
- ⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

*Putting the Christ back in Christmas begins with recognizing just how much we need the
gift God offers us.*

Here's a few facts about Christmas that you probably don't know:

- Public schools in Boston met on Christmas Day until 1870
- Christmas was not a legal holiday in any state before 1836
- The U.S. Congress met on Christmas until 1855

Surprising isn't it. For much of our nation's early history, Christmas just wasn't a big deal and was even suppressed.

The Puritan movement in England led to the suppression of Christmas¹ and when the Puritans came to America, Christmas was suppressed in the colonies of Puritan New England. The Puritans curbed Christmas for a couple of reasons. They wanted to restore a simple and more primitive Christianity, stripped of centuries of pagan traditions and practices that had been picked up along the way, as well as "Popish" practices such as the veneration of saints. This, of course, put St. Nicholas right in the Puritans' crosshairs. Second, the Puritans saw that Christmas had become one big excuse for wild, drunken partying and they wanted to put an end to it; no more Christmas would mean no more Christmas office parties.

Were the Puritans fully successful in this crackdown? No. But as one commentator of the day put it, England (and, hence, America) had "lost its Christmas habit."² To illustrate how far Christmas fell, two researchers examined all the December issues of the London *Times* from 1790-1835. In twenty of those forty-five years, the paper lacked a single mention of Christmas. The stifling of Christmas lingered in England and America until the middle of the 19th century when Christmas was resurrected.

This resurrection of Christmas in England and America was led by:

- the writer, Washington Irving, who brought back St. Nick in a way that is still familiar to us now,
- the 1821 poem of disputed authorship, *The Night before Christmas*,
- Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who popularized Christmas trees, family gatherings on the holiday, and other elements of a "Victorian Christmas," and most importantly,
- Charles Dickens, with the publication of *A Christmas Carol* in 1843. It is an overstatement to claim that Dickens invented the Christmas we know, but not by all that much.

A Christmas Carol

A recent development in the publishing world has been the explosion in so-called "Christian fiction." Go to any bookstore and you'll find shelves filled with novels of one sort or another that are pitched as having been written by Christians for Christians. It is almost as if any novel not on those shelves must be non-Christian!

So what then do we do with Dickens, O'Connor, Dostoevsky and countless other great writers whose works never show up on shelves of "Christian fiction," but who have much to say about God, humankind, sin, redemption, and the Good News? They wrote *from inside the Christian worldview* and for audiences who largely professed to be Christians.

In the case of Dickens, though he never had much interest in theology per se, he used his vast literary skills to craft stark indictments of Victorian England's neglect of the poor. He reminded his readers that Christian love is not mere sentiment, but consists of what we actually do. Dickens had no patience for those who would speak kindly of the poor, wish them well, and then send them away hungry. I suspect Dickens felt right at home with the New Testament letter by James.

I hope that you will make the time to read Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* in the coming weeks. Though the novella isn't very long (only about eighty pages), the many film adaptations still must leave out much. Read it slowly and with an eye to the Christian themes that Dickens has woven together. For example, what does Jacob Marley see as having been his great failing? Is the story really about Scrooge's greed or is it about his utter rejection of all relationships, close and distant? Is Scrooge's repentance really genuine? How would we know? And you might ask yourself why Dickens never explicitly Jesus anywhere in the story.

¹ The observance of Christmas was outlawed by the English Parliament on Dec 24, 1642.

² From *A Candid History of Christmas*, by Bruce David Forbes. If you are interested in the story how the Christmas we celebrate came to be, this book is an excellent place to start.

This is how the Christmas you and I know came to be . . . for good and for ill.

Sadly though, this “resurrection” of Christmas in the 19th century was marked by one key characteristic: Jesus was missing. It was a “Christless Christmas,” eerily similar to the Christless Christianity we’ve talked about this fall.

Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is an excellent example. It is chock full of Christian values and perspectives: caring for the poor, generosity, grace, redemption, and so on. But never, not once, is Jesus mentioned in Dickens’ story. No baby Jesus, no nativity, no Christ.

Don’t get me wrong. The so-called “Christmas spirit” is wonderful: kindness and compassion, generosity and grace. But disconnecting it from Jesus is a bit like turning off your car’s engine as you fly down the highway. You might not notice much at first, but after a while the car will grind to a halt.

Paraments and the Christian Year

The decorative cloths on our altar, these ecclesiastical ornaments, are called “paraments” and we have four sets: green, purple, red, and white.

The color of the paraments are changed as we move through the Christian year, which begins today. The season of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar.

The Christian year is organized around two cycles. The first is the Christmas Cycle: Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The second cycle is the Easter Cycle: Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Within each cycle, there is a season of preparation (Advent & Lent) that is symbolized by the color purple, hence our paraments have been changed from green to purple. We’ll be taking a look at the changes in the Christian seasons and colors as we move through the upcoming Christian year.

Purple is the color of both penitence and royalty. We are used to thinking of Lent as a time of repentance and preparation, but I don’t know that “repent” and “Advent” usually go together in our minds. Yet, the traditional Advent scriptures always include the ministry of John the Baptist and his call to repentance. Some of our most enduring Christmas stories, such as Scrooge and the Grinch, are stories of repentance and transformed lives. Advent is explicitly a time to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ-child, our Master and Savior. Advent is a time to shed ourselves of all that would divert us from the love of God and neighbor.

A Christ-filled Christmas

Without the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11), the spirit of Christmas becomes nothing more than the residue of a once-held commitment to him who made us and has saved us. Who could argue that large segments of American society have lost touch entirely with the Christ in Christmas, even as they merrily roll along imbued with the “spirit of the season.”

Today’s passage from Isaiah was written in the darkest hour of Israel’s history, the time of the Babylonian exile. The people knew full well where their abandonment of God had led them. They desperately sought a rescue from the one on whom they had turned.

And it is Jesus who is the answer to Israel’s plaintive cry in Isaiah 64: “Rip the heavens open, O God, and come down!” It is Jesus who is the concrete demonstration that God is a God of grace, who has not “remembered” the people’s sins against God and one another. Thus, how strange it is that we have so easily forgotten that God actually did rip the heavens open and come down, that the season of Advent prepares us for the coming of Immanuel.

What the writer of Isaiah 64 hoped and prayed for is the gift that we have been given, if only we will recognize our *need* for this gift of a savior, one “who, being in very nature

God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage,” (Phil. 2:6) but came down and was born to a virgin from a no-account village on a Galilean hillside.

But too often, the veneer of comfortable civilization blinds us to the darkness that lies within us all, this monster Sin that lurks at our door and threatens to destroy us. (Genesis 4:7) The many blessings that we’ve been given mislead us into thinking that all we really need is a bit more education or some special counseling or a new medication to finally and completely overcome our heart of darkness.

In reflecting on the events at Penn State, Tom Boswell of the Washington Post drew readers’ attention to Joe Paterno. Boswell calls the problem our “flaw lines,” but he speaks of what we Christians call Sin. Here is what he wrote about Joe Pa:

How could this happen? Look at a larger context. For generations, shabby coaches have turned their eyes, avoided learning incriminating details and said “tell all this to the athletic director” when they heard about a player or booster breaking NCAA rules.

Paterno didn’t turn away. He’d act right, even if it hurt.

He set the gold standard and everybody around him, pretty much, shaped up for 46 years. He built a model program, transformed a school — he may have helped raise a billion dollars for Penn State — and helped almost everybody he touched.

Then along came Sandusky.

“This is a tragedy. It is one of the great sorrows of my life,” Paterno’s statement said. “With the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had done more.”

When the earthquake struck Paterno’s life, it attacked him directly at his flaw lines — his pride in his life’s work and, perhaps, an utter inability to imagine the worst of a lifelong close friend. So in 2002 he appears, and this is actually a generous interpretation, to have reacted with don’t-want-to-know negligence of his ethical responsibilities, as a coach and as a man.

Forces collide, conspire, confuse and an icon of integrity fails to act, fails to see, but in his case, the stakes were far higher than wins. The lives of children, already at risk, were in the balance.

Something shameful, if everything falls just wrong, could happen to any of us. How do we know? Because it even happened to Joe Paterno.

The mistakes Paterno made are mistakes any of us could make. To deny this is to deny Paul’s straightforward claim in his letter to the Christians in Rome: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Joe Paterno. Me. You.

We NEED the gift that God offers in Jesus. The arrival of the Christ-child was Good News 2,000 years ago. It is still Good News now. Indeed, it will always be the Best News possible.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* still shapes the way many people see Christmas. Yet, Jesus is never mentioned by Dickens. Is that really a big deal? There are certainly many Christian themes in *A Christmas Carol*. We once had a whole sermon series on the story; it is very “preachable.” But can the body of Christ sustain the Christmas spirit — peace and good will to all — without fully acknowledging Christ? How does the Christmas season help us to grasp that we NEED a savior, that all humanity does? And if Christmas celebrations ignore the Jesus who died on the cross, then what is left that is genuinely Christian?
2. If you strip away the shopping and gift-giving from the Christmas season, what is really left. If there was no gift-giving, how much Christmas would be left? Would it be reduced to the December equivalent of Thanksgiving?
3. It is hard for most Christians to comprehend that for much of Christian history, Christmas just wasn’t that big a deal. Christians saw themselves as Easter people, not Christmas people. Why do you think public attention to Christmas has far outstripped Easter in a country where 75% of the people are self-described Christians?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. *The Advent Readings are all drawn from the Common Lectionary. You might ask yourself why these Scripture passages were chosen for Advent.*

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Monday, Isaiah 2:1-5 Looking ahead to the Day of the Lord and the coming of the kingdom of God</p> | <p>Tuesday, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 A prayer for deliverance from Israel's enemies</p> |
| <p>Wednesday, Jeremiah 33:14-16 All may be bleak, but God will yet accomplish the rescue of Israel, and, hence, the world.</p> | <p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 Paul's words of thanksgiving</p> |
| <p>Friday, Luke 21:25-36 Jesus' vision of his own coming vindication</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p> |

