

Isaiah 35

The desert and the dry land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus.
2 They will burst into bloom,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
They will receive the glory of Lebanon,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.
They will see the Lord's glory,
the splendor of our God.
3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and support the unsteady knees.
4 Say to those who are panicking:
"Be strong! Don't fear!
Here's your God,
coming with vengeance;
with divine retribution
God will come to save you."
5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf will be cleared.
6 Then the lame will leap like the deer,
and the tongue of the speechless will sing.
Waters will spring up in the desert,
and streams in the wilderness.
7 The burning sand will become a pool,
and the thirsty ground, fountains of water.
The jackals' habitat, a pasture;^[a]
grass will become reeds and rushes.
8 A highway will be there.
It will be called The Holy Way.
The unclean won't travel on it,
but it will be for those walking on that way.^[b]
Even fools won't get lost on it;
9 no lion will be there,
and no predator will go up on it.
None of these will be there;
only the redeemed will walk on it.
10 The Lord's ransomed ones will return and enter Zion with singing,
with everlasting joy upon their heads.
Happiness and joy will overwhelm them;
grief and groaning will flee away.

Psalms 146

5 The person whose help is the God of Jacob—
the person whose hope rests on the Lord their God—
is truly happy!
6 God: the maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
God: who is faithful forever,

7 who gives justice to people who are oppressed,
who gives bread to people who are starving!
The Lord: who frees prisoners.
8 The Lord: who makes the blind see.
The Lord: who straightens up those who are bent low.
The Lord: who loves the righteous.
9 The Lord: who protects immigrants,
who helps orphans and widows,
but who makes the way of the wicked twist and turn!
10 The Lord will rule forever!
Zion, your God will rule from one generation to the next!
Praise the Lord!

James 5

7 Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord. Consider the farmer who waits patiently for the coming of rain in the fall and spring, looking forward to the precious fruit of the earth. 8 You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you won't be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door!

10 Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patient resolve and steadfastness. 11 Look at how we honor those who have practiced endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job. And you have seen what the Lord has accomplished, for the Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Matthew 11

2 Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, 3 "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

4 Jesus responded, "Go, report to John what you hear and see. 5 Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them.[a] 6 Happy are those who don't stumble and fall because of me."

7 When John's disciples had gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John: "What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? 8 What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. 9 What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I'm sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.

11 "I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

In just under two weeks, we'll gather in this space on Christmas Eve and sing together *What Child Is This?* These iconic lyrics resonate throughout the season in part because we assume we know the answer. It's Jesus, duh! In fact, many of our Christmastide phrases seem to assume we know precisely what Jesus is and what Jesus is all about. It's Jesus, duh! We know what child this is! But do we really know the **who**? As we prepare for the Christmas festival and expect to meet the first and greatest Christmas miracle, we might do well to ask this question with a more serious intent. Who are we waiting for in the manger? Jesus is God's justice personified.

This question – who is Jesus – is actually quite biblical. John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus and basically asks, “Are you the real deal, or are we still waiting on someone else?” John looks at Jesus and wants to know, *who are you?* The answer that Jesus gives is an interesting one, at least. Those once blind now see, those once crippled now walk, those with diseases are now cleansed, those once deaf now hear, the dead now live, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them. Jesus doesn’t mean to be cryptic here, though it may sound that way to our modern ears. Instead, he’s naming that he’s fulfilled each of these different Jewish prophecies for the Messiah. Everything action that the Hebrew Bible expected of the Messiah, Jesus fulfilled. Jesus activates the reality of God’s justice. Or, in other words, Jesus is God’s justice personified. Jesus is the justice that John, that Israel, that all the earth has been awaiting.

But for some reason, when we gather around our manger scenes and prepare for the Christmas holiday, we don't seem too concerned with God's justice. We seem more concerned with, well, most anything else. How often have you heard someone preparing for Christmas complain that a sign at the store spelled Christmas **X dash M-A-S** or that a clerk smiled and said "Happy holidays!" Of course, the tradition of using the X to stand in for Christ dates back to the 4th century and still in common usage in church artwork. If you've ever seen this image, the Chi Rho, you've seen this longstanding tradition at work. And, the word holiday originates from "holy days" because medieval Christians recognized that, well, Christmas didn't start the week after Halloween, but that we had a month of holiday called Advent leading up to it, as well as Epiphany afterward. Jesus is God's justice personified, but rather than Jesus or justice, our focus is elsewhere.

That example seems rather benign compared to what's happening at the Mall of America in Minneapolis. Larry Jefferson-Gamble serves as a mall Santa every year. Larry happens to be black, and this year become the first African American Santa to appear at the world's largest mall. As you might expect, there's been some terrible, racist backlash against Larry and demanding that Santa is a white character. This is absurd not only because Santa looks different in every culture, but – and here's the real kicker – the historical St. Nicholas actually had brown skin. This ancient bishop was born in Myra, a town in the south of Turkey. Many of our gift-giving traditions were born in the honor of someone who has a lot more in common with a black Santa than a white one. The racist reactions to Larry's portrayal of Santa Clause aren't just bigoted, they're historically ridiculous. But, when we don't know who Jesus is – when we aren't attentive to Jesus as God's justice

personified – then we can make Christmas into whatever we want it to be, whether about commercialism and the accumulation of gifts, to propping up white supremacy in the middle of the mall. And Jesus is avidly against both of those things.

One of the reasons I'm glad to say happy holidays is because it's quite important to recognize it's not Christmas yet. We're not ready for Christmas, and I don't just mean we haven't finished buying gifts and trimming trees. Everything from our inane obsession with how people greet us at the store to the unabashed racism of refusing to see a dark-skinned Santa tells me that we don't actually know who Jesus is. Our behavior in light of Christmas tells me we've got no idea who's in that manger. Whatever child this is, I'm certain he'd be appalled at what passes as celebrations in his honor. We need the happy holidays of Advent to recall and remember who Jesus is and what Jesus is all about.

That's why, every year, we don't completely decorate for Christmas at the beginning of the Advent season, why Jesus still isn't in the manger and chrismons still aren't in the tree. It's not because we lack holiday cheer, but because we're still preparing for Christmas and so our environment reflects that we don't yet fully know God, that we need to look more closely at the God who appears in the manger so we don't just pretend that baby can be bent to our will.

So, then, how do we know who this is in the manger? How do we learn to recognize Jesus for who he truly is rather than who we've assumed him to be? The Bible. Sometimes the Sunday school answer is also the right answer. Scripture, both engaging scripture in a daily fashion and reflecting on how scripture should affect our daily lives, can help us to know who it is that shepherds watch and angels sing.

As we consider the state of our congregation, one of the things that research has revealed is that churches that

believe they have something other people need, that want other people to meet Jesus, and that read the Bible more often are more likely to grow than their counterparts. Now, that presents us with more than just a church growth program. Rather, it reveals to us the connection between knowing God, knowing people, and helping people to know God. We've got to become more familiar with God's words to connect more with God's heart.

And today's psalm helps to see God's heart. What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping? This, this is Christ, the King, who gives justice to the oppressed and feeds the starving! What child is this? Christ, who frees prisoners and makes the blind to see! What child is this? Christ, who raises up the crippled, who loves the righteous, who befriends immigrants and fights for foreigners and embraces orphans and defends widows. This child puts roadblocks into the plans of the wicked, so of course Herod

would want to kill him. Not only is this child the once and future king, but this child's very intent is to challenge the authority of every Herod in the world, to foil the plans of the oppressors, to scuttle the strategies of hateful.

This child doesn't seem all that concerned with how we spell Christmas, and this child – a brown Palestinian child born to brown Palestinian parents – would certainly celebrate a brown St. Nick. A preponderance of the Bible points us to this God in the manger who fights on behalf of the oppressed people, who defends the integrity of immigrants, who celebrates the dignity of people with disabilities, and who foils the plans of the selfish. That's what child this is. That's who this child is.

How we spell Christmas matters not at all to Jesus, but how we celebrate Christmas? That matters to Jesus because it reveals who we are and who we believe Jesus to be. Jesus remains that same no matter what we think of

him. Jesus is going to embrace people – and Santas – of all races, all cultures, of all ethnicities. No matter what we decide to do as individuals or as a church or as a country, Jesus will continue to feed those who hunger, give to those who ask, defend the cause of the helpless, and lift up the plights of immigrants. That's what the Bible tells us our God is all about, and in each of those situations, we meet God. We meet God not only as the giver, but as the one who needs the assistance. What child is this? This child is one who admits need and meets need. This child is Jesus, God's justice personified, and Jesus invites us to be live that justice as well. That's the reason for the season. Amen.