

Isaiah 7

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: 11 "Ask a sign from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the grave[b] or as high as heaven."

12 But Ahaz said, "I won't ask; I won't test the Lord."

13 Then Isaiah said, "Listen, house of David! Isn't it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? 14 Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel.[c] 15 He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. 16 Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned. 17 The Lord will bring upon you, upon your people, and upon your families days unlike any that have come since the day Ephraim broke away from Judah—the king of Assyria."

Psalms 80

Shepherd of Israel, listen!

You, the one who leads Joseph as if he were a sheep.

You, who are enthroned upon the winged heavenly creatures.

Show yourself 2 before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh!

Wake up your power!

Come to save us!

3 Restore us, God!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

4 Lord God of heavenly forces,

how long will you fume against your people's prayer?

5 You've fed them bread made of tears;

you've given them tears to drink three times over!

6 You've put us at odds with our neighbors;

our enemies make fun of us.

7 Restore us, God of heavenly forces!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

17 Let your hand be with the one on your right side—

with the one whom you secured as your own—

18 then we will not turn away from you!

Revive us so that we can call on your name.

19 Restore us, Lord God of heavenly forces!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

Romans 1

From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for God's good news. 2-3 God promised this good news about his Son ahead of time through his prophets in the holy scriptures. His Son was descended from David. 4 He was publicly identified as God's Son with power through his resurrection from the dead, which was based on the Spirit of holiness. This Son is Jesus Christ our Lord. 5 Through him we have received God's grace and our appointment to be apostles. This was to bring all Gentiles to faithful obedience for his name's sake. 6 You who are called by Jesus Christ are also included among these Gentiles.

7 To those in Rome who are dearly loved by God and called to be God's people.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 1

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. 19 Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. 20 As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

23 Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,

And they will call him, Emmanuel.[a]

(Emmanuel means "God with us.")

24 When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. 25 But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

Sermon

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

I've got to tell you something. No matter how many times I've gone to the carnival and played games on the midway, I've never won the real prize, at least not that I remember. I've always brought something home from the games where "everyone's a winner," but those tiny toys were, well, pretty pathetic. You know the ones I'm talking about. The knockoff cartoon characters that looks less like a minion from *Despicable Me* and more like lumpy lemon with googly eyes. Of all of the days I've spent at fairs and arcades like these, I've only known days as a loser.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises us that, with the coming Messiah, we'll experience days unlike any you've known. Days unlike any you've known is a sort of

shorthand summary of God's intention. The Christmas miracle brings with it something surprisingly, significantly new. This, then, has me wondering: What kind of days do we know? And what will be so different?

On Tuesday this week, we lost one of our dear friends here at CLC, Mickey Denbow. Some of my favorite memories of her will be the time where I sat with her and talked about the various things she faced in journey, about all the days she faced during her 94 years with us. Her family left Germany during Hitler's rise to power and came to America, just prior to the beginning of the Great Depression. She returned to Europe as a nurse in the Allied Forces during WWII and witnessed unimaginable loss of life. She married and buried three husbands. She knew a number of difficult of days.

Of course, she also knew some wonderful joy. She bore into the world wonderful children, who bore into the world

wonderful grandchildren, who bore into the world wonderful great grandchildren, all of whom Mickey got to enjoy. In her work as a nurse during and after the war, she took seriously her call to offer aid and comfort to those who suffered, and loved to reminisce with other veterans about their service together. I'm thankful for the days that she shared with us, those of joy and those of difficulty, for through them God brought us all closer together.

The odd thing about this Christmas prophecy is that we hear of a coming time that will be like no days that we've remembered. Why is that? Perhaps it's because so many of our days seem defined by their hardships. Mickey's stories were powerful, in part, because of how well she persevered through the hardships she faced. My carnival days are defined by my losses. When Michelle and I talk about our first apartment, what comes to mind first usually is the lack of a kitchen, which meant we had to do the dishes in the

bathtub. Seriously. I'm sure y'all have similar stories, and all of them tell us that our memories seem bound to troubles, even when they're stories of triumphs.

More troubling than that, though, is that many of our celebrations often cover over the sufferings of others. We celebrate holidays like Thanksgiving and Columbus Day, which seemed innocent enough to me as a child, and yet also mark the beginnings of genocide of countless Native Americans. Every time we get a promotion or new job, our celebration covers over the fact that this means someone else didn't get the new role or pay raise. Developments in technology lead to the rise of new prosperity in some communities and a fall from grace those that were built around the now-outdated systems. Our world seems constantly identified with a zero sum game.

That's just it. We live our days as though they're all zero sum games, as though someone's victory always

necessitates somebody else's defeat. Our days are identified by scarcity, not because there's not actually enough, mind you – for instance, agricultural economists tell us that there's plenty of food in this world for all to be fed – but because we're so tied to fear and greed and gluttony that sin settles over our cities like smog. We hoard, rather than share, that food, in order to maintain prices, to secure profits. Our days are clouded with sin, including our personal sin, the sins of others, and the systematic sin that's permeated our social structures. The light of God seems hazy through a fog of divisive competition that pits us against one another, against creation, even against our own selves. We've believed the lie of the zero sum game, that there's never enough for us all to have some. What kind of days do we know? With every victory, there is also defeat.

I imagine that's something like Joseph's reaction when he discovered Mary was pregnant. The idea of calling off their engagement quietly was a personal loss for Joseph, but for his social standing, it seemed like the only way to preserve himself. As a 1st Jew, he risked his religious and societal status by marrying a pregnant woman. This was an arranged marriage of two people who may not have known one another well, so to everyone else, it seemed that Mary had been unfaithful, which was a stigma on a number of levels. He could choose this potential relationship and support Mary, but doing so risked their ability to earn money, threatened their family relationships, endangered their very safety. Joseph didn't need to do this quietly, so his decision to pursue a resolution that didn't embarrass Mary shows something of deep care and compassion, perhaps even love, for this woman that he likely didn't otherwise know. It seemed like a zero sum game for Joseph. No matter what

decision he made, it seemed that loss and gain were necessarily included for him, for Mary, and yes, for Jesus as well.

Except Jesus refuses to be controlled by zero sum games. That's one of the wonderful things about Christmas. In Jesus, God breaks apart the notion that someone's gain must mean somebody else's loss. That's what we wait for this Advent: the new imagination that comes in Jesus, which declares that God's victory, God's salvation, is meant for everyone. God already prepared for Joseph and Mary a future based in Joseph's decision to be faithful to Mary, because Mary's pregnancy was the result of her faithfulness to God.

God's victory in Jesus doesn't mean that someone else must lose, not really. Of course, we talk about Jesus's victory over sin, death, and the devil, but those things – sin, death, and the devil – aren't properly things. Now, I'm talking a bit

of philosophy here, but stay with me. What I mean is this. Sin is imperfection. Sin is the lack of goodness. It's only definition is negative, not positive. Death is the absence of life. It's not a thing, but the absence of a thing. The devil, whose existence is tied up in sin and death, is actually a distorted angel, one of God's first creatures in rebellion against God's grace. Seriously! The devil's origin, and the origin of all evil, is that God's good creations cease being good.

And here's the fun part. That means when Jesus wins over sin and death, that no one loses, because Jesus is filling in the negative gaps with positive things. Goodness appears in perfect fashion. Abundant life shines without end. When sin and death are gone, even the devil doesn't lose, because when evil disappears, the angel that God created reappears. This prophecy, that we'll know days like we've never before known, means that we'll no longer define our

days by our hardships because those hardships – the evil that we face – will no longer exist.

God promises us days like we've never known, not since before our time, days of legendary perfection of which we've only heard, and that's the key: there's enough for everybody and a double portion of leftovers. It's like the Christmas dinner at grandma's house, where there's fifteen people and food for five hundred. The coming of Jesus means the end of zero sum games. In God's Kingdom, everyone who plays the carnival games receives the giant minion because in God's Kingdom, there are no losers. The victory of your neighbor, your coworker, your peer, your friend, your spouse, of anyone, doesn't mean that you lose. It means that you win all the more.

When God promises days like we've never known, it means we're destined for days defined by joy rather than hardship, for days defined by love, days defined by

completion, days where there's always enough. God promises days of true thanksgiving, where there will be shared land, shared resources, shared food for all. God promises days where we don't revere the oppressors, but instead eradicate oppression. God promises days where we'll be joined in life again with Mickey and all those who've gone on before us into the golden streets of God's Kingdom.

God promises an end zero sum games, and for us who await the coming Christ, that means we no longer need to live like there's not enough resources today. We, like Joseph, can listen to the voice of God instead of the voice of our culture. We can let our days be defined by God's abundance and share our wealth with those that have none, share our talents with those who'd like to learn, and create space to care for children who aren't our own. Who knows: we might just end up swaddling Jesus, the very

fullness of God's abundance, who brings with him more than enough to share with us all. Amen.