

Isaiah 35:1-10

Every year, most of us get caught up in making Christmas "wish lists." Children's lists are typically very long and filled with plastic (Legos/Barbies), fur (puppies/kittens) and microchips (tablets/video games, there's even a talking toy hamster that repeats what the child says). Adults draw up lists too - even though we won't all admit it. Grown-ups' wishes range from the mundane ("I wish everyone would clean up after themselves") to the miraculous ("Peace on earth").

Have you ever considered what it may be that Jesus wants for Christmas? There may be two entries on Jesus' Christmas wish list. And what is first on Jesus' Christmas list? Jesus wants Christmas back - the true miracle of Christmas brought alive again. I've heard great reviews of Kevin Costner's Christmas show, hopefully it reaches people who don't know the story. Because, believe it or not, in today's culture there are plenty of people who haven't heard it.

Our culture has a skewed idea of what Christmas is all about. As Ralph Bergengren puts it in "The Unwise Christmas," "Christmas itself may be called into question / If carried so far it creates indigestion." An author, Aldous Huxley writes about inebriation in the book *The Genius and the Goddess*, "Drive carefully." He writes, "This is a Christian country, and it's the Savior's birthday. Practically everyone you will see will be drunk" (Aldous Huxley, *The Genius and the Goddess* [New York: Harper, 1955]).

Many Christians have a tradition of making a so-called "Christmas offering." This is a special gift of money or some other needed commodity to the church or to a relief organization during the Christmas season. Most of us would naturally label this kind of giving as "a nice thing to do." But this year, consider that this is not just a nice thing to do at Christmas; it is a necessary thing to do if we are to celebrate Christ's coming in ways that are fulfilling and in keeping with his birth. We have plenty of ways we accomplish this here at Immanuel, and many of you are very generous in your giving.

Isaiah's text sings the true miracle, the true meaning of Christmas. In the season of Advent, we are called to look forward to the arrival of a Messiah who will do nothing less than save the world. At Christmas, the long-promised Messiah arrives and with him, a season of untold wonders unfolds. The miracles accompanying Christ's birth are not twinkling lights and stacks of gifts. The miracles of Christmas are the tough, demanding miracles of a wilderness given bloom, the blind given sight, the deaf given hearing, the lame given wholeness and the mute singing with joy. Jesus doesn't come to bring us "stuff." Jesus comes to stuff us with healing and wholeness and abundant life.

What Jesus wants for Christmas is for us to realize that with the birth of the Christ child, the Lord has ransomed our exiled souls and redeems all the children of God's creation. We celebrate because a child embodies both our hopes and fears, offering inspiration in an ordinary world.

We can, with Kenneth Patchen in "I Have Lighted the Candles, Mary," see in a "bitter world," "the cold, swollen face of war lean in the window," and still find joy, love and peace. The poet then speaks to his wife ("the taste of tears is in her mouth"), and to Christ's mother, revealing that Christmas may have been betrayed by the world, but must be kept alive in it. Otherwise, Patchen implies, we risk madness and destruction ("I Have Lighted the Candles, Mary" By Kenneth Patchen, from *COLLECTED POEMS OF KENNETH PATCHEN*, copyright ©1942 by Kenneth Patchen. Accessed on ShepherdExpress.com 12/13/25).

This all takes us to the reclamation mentioned in today's text. On the surface, at least, it would seem that modern Israel is achieving what God had promised its ancient ancestors. God had promised another group of returning Israelite exiles that they would experience another total reclamation project in the land: "The desert shall rejoice and blossom abundantly; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing" (Isaiah 35:1-2).

The prophet Isaiah is talking in this week's text about a reclamation that was initiated in Israel but would soon be shared everywhere; a reclamation that would not only restore the land, but people as well.

Isaiah is writing to a people who are staring the prospect of foreign domination and exile in the face. Isaiah announces God's judgment on a "rebellious people, faithless children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord" (30:9). Israel had been chosen by God to be a light to the nations, the people through whom God's great rescue mission for the world would come about. God had promised to Abraham, Israel's patriarch, that his family would become a nation, and that through that family and nation "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

But by the time of Isaiah, Israel's history had revealed a tragic cycle of failure in living up to that mission. The people drifted away from the God who chose them to other gods and self-serving patterns of sin and neglect of both others and the land. As a result, God would separate the people from the land, and both would suffer greatly under the weight of God's judgment. The remnant of Israel would go to exile in Babylon, and the land would fall into neglect and disrepair.

But even in the midst of that separation, God promises a great restoration of both land and people. Biblically speaking, humanity and creation are inseparably joined. Each is dependent on the other, and both are dependent on God. Isaiah reveals God's promise of a future time when the exiles would return and both land and people would be healed -- a time when "they shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God" (Isaiah 35:2).

Isaiah describes the healing effects of God's completed reclamation on both the land and the people. The weak and the fearful are strengthened and reassured (v. 3-4). Those dealing with disease and infirmities find their health restored (vv. 5-6). Water will break forth in the desert (v. 7). Moreover, God will provide a road in the desert, a way home for all those who have been far away and separated from God (vv. 8-10). The "ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (v. 10).

The people in Jesus' day were still looking for this promise to come true. Yes, some of the exiles did return within a generation, but they found themselves in a land still under foreign domination where much of the fruit of the land went to feed their captors. They continued to live under a cloud of fear, a weak client nation under the thumb of Rome. The sick and the broken still haunted the periphery of society. It was clear that God's promises hadn't yet become reality. But then Jesus stepped onto the scene -- Israel's true Messiah and the Word of God made flesh. When read through the lens of Jesus, Isaiah's promises come into sharp focus:

- Jesus went into the dry wilderness but was not conquered by it. He found food and sustenance in God and revealed God's glory in himself.

- Jesus strengthened "feeble knees" and calmed the fears of the anxious and broken.
- He opened the eyes of the blind, unstopped the ears of the deaf, called the lame to walk, opened the mouths of the speechless.
- He became "living water" for those dying of spiritual thirst (John 4), and proclaimed that he was "the way" in which people return to God (John 14:6). We see an echo here of the words of John the Baptist, quoting Isaiah 40 about preparing "the way of the Lord." John paved the way for Jesus, and Jesus paves the way for God's kingdom to become a reality. He faced the "ravenous beasts" of human sin at the cross, and yet returned from the dead.

All of this was a sign that God's reclamation of the world had begun. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus lived out God's plan and taught his disciples to do the same. He called it the kingdom of God and proclaimed it as the already-and-not-yet completion of the restoration of God's people and God's good creation. And, he promised to return and complete that work, ushering in a new creation where all of God's people will be at home. Advent reminds us again and again of the promises -- promises that only Jesus can fulfill. The season also invites us to think about how we can participate in God's total reclamation of his creation.

Jesus gathered the disciples around himself and taught them to do the very same things that he had done, training them to be workers for God's kingdom. We know that the kingdom isn't all the way here yet and won't be until Jesus returns, but in the meantime we are called to make the world around us look more and more like his kingdom so that when it comes it won't be such a culture shock!

If we take that mission seriously, we can begin to see some of the ways we can take on God's project every day:

- We engage in projects that care for the basic needs of people through our little food pantry, our donations to the City Mission, Meals on Wheels, and the mitten tree, our quilt ministry, and our community dinner to name some of our projects.
- Can we think of ways to be involved in the lives of those who are physically limited and often pushed to the margins of society? These are people Jesus spent time with and validated them.
- We create a "Holy Way" for people to come to know Christ and his kingdom through ministries of evangelism and hospitality (Isaiah 35:8).
- Can we determine every day to help people attain "joy and gladness" and make "sorrow and sighing" flee away? (v. 10).

If you've ever been to Israel you know that some of that desert-grown produce is some of the tastiest in the world. It takes skill and persistence in order to grow great fruit in places where it shouldn't be possible to do it. It takes skill and persistence to grow God's kingdom in the world as well. Jesus demonstrated how to do it, and promises to finish the work. May we give him a Christmas present by joining him in making the promise a reality!

All glory be to God.