

## What God Assumed

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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**Isaiah 63:7-17**

**Luke 2:25-39**

*“It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them. He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”*

With the crowds thinned, the frenzy ended, the relatives banished and routine resumed, those of us still reading the story must ask again what it means and what it matters that we have beheld our salvation in the face of Jesus Christ; though in times such as these, we who would follow him must ask more. Given the darkness in which the world dwells and the headlines that daily contradict the church’s claim, including Saturday’s senseless shooting in an Arizona grocery store marking the end of a political season filled with violent rhetoric now turned deadly--the not-so-new year finds us still wondering *how* it is that the world has been redeemed, made new, given a second birth because God not only looked down from heaven but now has come down from heaven to be born in Bethlehem.

Our wondering sends us to a time before the time of Christ’s birth and to a people who dwelt in a darkness that mirrors our own. During the waning years of the 6th century B.C., conditions among those who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon were desolate. Whereas the first few chapters of the prophet known as Third Isaiah [Isaiah 56-66] hold on to the promise of God’s light overcoming the darkness despite the evidence and include the words with which we called ourselves to worship last Sunday [Arise, shine! For your light has come and the glory of the Lord has arisen upon you!], by the time we arrive at this morning’s lesson, the words of the prophet “complement the bleak picture painted by the prophet Haggai,” writes Old Testament professor Paul Hanson. Together “[t]hey describe bitter enmity between rival groups in Judah. They make reference to civil and religious leaders who looked only after personal gain and to a court system riddled with corruption. They reflect a low level of community morale and a vindictive spirit that excluded the other nations of the world from any participation in God’s plan save destruction.” When I happened upon Third Isaiah, little did I know how truly I had stumbled on the Word of the Lord for such a time as this.

Those of you who were in Matt’s Advent seminar on Lament will recognize the form of the prophet’s address to God. At first, the gracious deeds of the Lord are recalled; the abundance of God’s steadfast love to the house of Israel is praised. Like any relationship, the prophet remembers how this relationship had started well and with the assumption, on God’s part, of good faith on ours. “‘Surely, they are my people,’” said the Lord, “‘children who will not deal falsely’; and he became their savior in all their distress.” Hanson finds Isaiah’s report of God’s assumption ingenuous, but I found myself momentarily incredulous at Isaiah’s words and wondered if it ever could have been so that God assumed good faith on our part. The Eternity that God is, the One in whom all time is held and beheld at once, taken in by our promise to love God with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength? How could this be?

And yet like Israel, through the lens of this story that means to tell us who we are and to whom we belong, I remembered God’s testing of Abraham, God’s legendary attempt to begin again after Adam and Eve, after Cain and Abel, after Noah and the

flood and Babel, with one whose trust in God was reckoned to him as righteousness. Perhaps that was the moment--with Abraham's knife in hand suspended against Isaac--when God also remembered: remembered God's image stamped upon the creature whom God made for himself, remembered the relationship that would be worth the life of God's own Son to redeem in the fullness of time. Perhaps for one brief shining moment, God assumed Abraham could be the one who would not deal falsely, the one who would carry the promise, and the one with whom God would be pleased to dwell.

Though given the characters that followed--Jacob's deception, Joseph's abandonment by his brothers, Aaron's idolatry in the wilderness, the corruption of judges, David's murderous adultery, the kings' apostasy--given Abraham's pitiful and prolific seed, only an almighty cognitive dissonance (or else a love that could not let us go) would have made the Maker of the heavens and the earth still assume we were worth the effort. "It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them," wrote third Isaiah in the darkness of post-exilic Jerusalem and in the middle of his lament. "He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." God assumed we were worth redeeming!

Nevertheless, continues Isaiah soberly and with Israel's exile in mind, "they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them." Or is this what Israel *assumed*? Assumed God had become their enemy; *assumed* God had himself fought against them. It would have been a logical assumption. Going all the way back to first Isaiah [Isaiah 1-39] in the 8th century B.C. and to words that hold in solution the hope of the season of Advent ["The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light"]; then recalling the expansive words of promise spoken by Second Isaiah [Isaiah 40-55] to the exiles in Babylon ["I will turn the darkness before them into light"]; and even rereading the words of Third Isaiah that attempted hope in the midst of ruin ["For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you], we can only imagine the depth of anguish in the prophet's lament: "We wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom." Who else is there to blame for this but God? As Isaiah's lament reminds us, it is in our human nature to assume God's enmity when darkness descends as it does in every age, in every place, in every human heart, assume God's absence, even assume God is not in these latter days. If, in the legendary beginning of this relationship, God mistakenly assumed our integrity, in the midst of the unrelenting darkness, we assume God's enmity or absence.

Again the lament turns on itself. "Then they remembered the days of old," says Isaiah in the next verse, and then we realize in the midst of Israel's lament what we do, Sunday in and Sunday out, in the midst of our own. We remember and recite over and over again what God has done. We tell ourselves this story endlessly in hopes that it will help our eyes see our salvation set against the dimly lit future and the violence of our present hour. More often than not, we do not see, instead joining the inhabitants of Jerusalem in their move from despair to anger and asking as they do with their next breath, "Where?" "Where is the one who brought [our ancestors] up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit...who led them through the depths?"

On the one hand, we with them ask after God's presence in human history because the story we have been given leads us to assume the God who once acted will act again and on our behalf. Hanson reminds us that the question has ever been asked in times of intractable tragedy, asked by all who have watched as a child struggled, hanging between life and death, on the gallows or on the floor of a Safeway: Where is God now? "And I heard a voice within me answer," wrote Elie Wiesel, "He is

hanging here on the gallows.” Before the manger, we could barely imagine this, let alone assume this!

But the prophet’s second “Where?”, says Hanson, is more painful still. “It goes beyond inquiry regarding God’s absence to questions about God’s nature and character. It asks, in effect, ‘Are the cynics in the community right in their claims that your arm is too short to save us, your ear too dull to hear our cries?’” They beseech God to “look down” but that is not enough. God’s searing gaze from afar, God’s disembodied word in the law and the prophets will no longer do. The human cry in the midst of darkness is for God to “*come* down”.

Therefore in the fullness of time, the only One ever born of woman who has not dealt falsely emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. The Eternity that God is, the One in whom all time is held and beheld at once, assumed, not in Abraham but in the Son, the redeemed Image of the creature who was made to love God with heart and mind and soul and strength. What did God assume? Said the church from the beginning, what God assumed was our human being in its entirety with nothing left out save the distance we have kept from the God who has chosen not to be God without us.

Early in the church’s life, a theologian from the East named Gregory of Nazianzus argued vehemently against those who held otherwise, holding that “what has not been assumed has not been healed: it is what is united to his divinity that is saved....Let them not grudge us our total salvation, or endue the Savior with only bones and nerves and mere appearance of humanity.” That is to say, if God were not in Christ, if in him who was born of Mary, our human condition in all of its frailty and failure, in all of its sickness unto death, had not been assumed by God, then the unspeakable distance we keep from the God who merely looks down on creation remains. But in Christ God did assume our humanity, said Gregory, and so redeemed, healed, saved the relationship for which we were made.

Therefore, though your eyes cannot see him now, he is with you in the depths, in the days when you no longer think you can go on and in the nights when the darkness threatens to overtake you because, as another early church father named Athanasius wrote in his classic treatise “On the Incarnation”, “The Saviour of us all, the Word of God, in His great love took to Himself a body and moved as Man among [mortals], meeting their senses, so to speak, half way.” He meets us half-way on the road to Jericho, binds our wounds and pays the price of our healing; he meets us half-way in the Garden of Gethsemane and sheds our tears alone while we sleep; he meets us half-way on the road to Emmaus when we think all is lost because the One in whom we had hoped lies lifeless in the grave and breaks bread at table until our eyes are opened and we recognize him; he meets us half-way between the cradle and the grave and bids us follow him.

Though finally he meets us completely when he assumes the consequences of our lives lived apart from God on the cross; when he assumes the death we must die; when he finds us even as we make our bed in Sheol; and when he is raised not as a ghost but takes the resurrected body he has assumed into the Eternity that is God. Most astonishing for me as I plumbed the depths of early Christian thought to understand what God assumed was the claim that “The resurrected Christ does not leave behind this world, these bodies and creaturely existence, even as he triumphed over sin and death. On the contrary,” writes Barth’s translator Geoffrey Bromiley “he demonstrated, in his embodied, resurrected state, that all that he was as a human being—as the one born of the Virgin Mary, who suffered under Pontius Pilate—is taken into the very life of the triune God.” What God has assumed is not only our birth and our death but God in Christ has assumed our redeemed lives eternally, the

lives of those whom we have loved and lost to death made perfectly themselves in Him: *Babe, all mortal babes excelling,/Content our earthly lot to share,/...Blessed Jesus, we implore Thee/With humble love and holy fear,/In the land that lies before Thee,/Forget not us who linger here/May the shepherd's lowly calling/ Ever to Thy heart be dear!* In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.