

Through the Sundays of Advent, Dr. Sullivan and I will be preaching out of texts from the prophet Isaiah. Our focus will be on the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love, which the Messiah brings. As countless people before us have done, each week we will light a candle of the Advent Wreath, which enflames our faith in these holy gifts. Today we lit the candle of hope. So let us consider how we receive it.

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In these first few days of December, we can still tell ourselves this is the year we're going to get Christmas right. We're not going to get crazy or stressed out. We'll keep it simple, but make sure we give our loved ones a wonderful holiday. Then we hear the prophet Isaiah this morning interrupting this well-intentioned resolve. Our hope, he claims, comes not from what we accomplish or give, but from the Christmas surprises God brings us.

Isaiah offered his prophecy to the Hebrews who had been taken captive to Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and carried them there. In Babylon the Hebrews were not cast into slavery like their ancestors were in Egypt. In fact, their life was not particularly hard. For a couple of generations now they had been able to hold jobs, buy property, raise families in peace, and they were free to worship. So the problem for the Hebrews in captivity wasn't that life was terrible. It was just vaguely dissatisfying because Babylon wasn't where they were supposed to be.

We know about lives that are vaguely dissatisfying, or maybe you would even say vaguely satisfying. Few of us would say that we're miserable. When we see the lives of those in poverty in our city or around the world, we know we shouldn't complain. So we tell ourselves, life is okay. We have food to eat, warm places to live, and we're not worried about foreign armies invading or missiles falling on our heads. And yet, our hearts aren't exactly burning with passion. It's been a while since we heard a compelling vision, and as a society few of us are bounding with hope. But at least we are doing okay. Sort of. We've learned to lower our expectations and just tend our own gardens. And that's life in Babylon—where you learn to settle for good enough.

Then Christmas comes along, and every year something from our souls comes alive in us. Before long we will find ourselves singing about angels proclaiming glory to God and peace on earth. And we will again get caught up in the cherished story again about an unassuming couple who couldn't even find a place to spend the night giving birth to the Savior of the world. Somewhere along the way the dream about beholding a quiet miracle will return to our hearts. That's when we dare to remember that we were created for more than lives that have been tailored down to good enough.

But not knowing how to pull angels down from the sky to make a holy day, we knock ourselves out to create a holiday that can distract us from the routines of the rest of the year. But that resolve is what destroys our earlier resolve to keep the celebration of Christmas reasonable. Pretty soon we're telling ourselves that we're going to pull off our own holiday miracle. We should know we're in trouble when we say things like: "Everyone is going to be so happy to be together. We're going to laugh and tell stories at the family table. Maybe we'll sing a few carols around the piano. I'm going to teach my daughter-in-law how to bake my Christmas bread, and she'll be so delighted to learn from me. I've even bought matching Christmas sweaters for everybody." When parishioners tell me these plans, I always want to ask, "Is this the same family you had last year?"

When Isaiah gives his prophecy to the Hebrews, he doesn't tell them to have a holiday or pretend like they are back in Jerusalem, and everything is fine. He tells them to prepare the way of the Lord—make a highway because the glory of the Lord is on its way to you. In ancient times there was a custom of building a new road for a conquering king to use. The Persians built one into Babylon when they defeated it, which was just before Cyrus, the King of the Persians allowed the Hebrews to return. But Isaiah isn't talking about Cyrus. He is proclaiming that the Lord God is coming so get prepared to receive more of the Messiah than you have known.

They had to receive God in Babylon before they could find the vision and passion to return to Jerusalem. And we have to get prepared for the advent of Jesus Christ before we can become passionate about moving toward the new Jerusalem, the City of God, the peaceable reign of our Savior on earth.

So Christmas, when we celebrate a Messiah who has come, and who is still coming, is not really about what we give. It's about what we're prepared to receive.

This is why children understand Christmas better than adults. Only grown-ups think Christmas is about giving. Ask any kid and they will tell you that Christmas is all about receiving. In all my years of ministry I have never had a child come for pastoral counseling to talk about the stress of the holidays. They aren't worried about making travel plans, getting the cards in the mail, throwing the parties, maxing out their credit cards, or everyone getting along. No, a child's only stress is waiting for Christmas to come. They have it just right.

According to the biblical narratives, God is the only one who is giving at Christmas, and most of these gifts come in the form of an interruption to people who have settled for so much less than wonder in life. An old priest named Zachariah had settled into not having his prayers for a child answered, and when an angel breaks into his prayers to tell him his wife is going to give birth to John the Baptist his only response is "How can that be?" A young virgin was just planning to get married to a local carpenter when Gabriel tells her the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her, and she will give birth to the Savior of the world. That was not what she had planned, and certainly not what Joseph planned. Shepherds were just taking care of their sheep one night, as they had always done and always planned on doing, when the glory of the Lord broke out all around them. And they were terrified.

This is how God gives hope into the world and into our lives. The prophets and angels interrupt our coping strategies with good enough to proclaim that there is more than we had hoped for, and far more than we have settled for. Because God is not done.

If ever there was a day in our lifetime that the world needed the church to believe that God is not done giving the blessed Christmas gifts of hope, peace, love, and joy this is that day. So let the church this Christmas stand aside from the social polarization, cynical blaming, and comfortable despair with clarity about our deepest convictions—the thin veneer between heaven and earth can always break open and more of the glory of God can be revealed. Let us now be the prophets who say, "Prepare the way of the Lord." And let us be the angels who now say, "Behold. Fear not. The Lord is with you."

That is what our church's social witness and mission is about. It is what our worship, music, Christian education, and fellowship is about. It is why we seek to be a light set on the hill. It is all because we refuse to miss the message of Christmas—God is not done giving. But we cannot reflect the light of that hope to our darkened world if we have not received it.

Receiving is hard. We learned the lessons of maturity too well. Most of us would much rather give than receive, I know. We find joy in making others happy. But the gifts people really need—hope, peace, joy, love can only come from above. And, again, you have to have received them to give them.

So hear the admonition of Isaiah to get ready to receive. Prepare the way of the Messiah. Light the candles. Come to worship. Decorate your home. Let yourself hum a Christmas carol. And pray that it can all open your eyes to "Behold." For the sake of your soul, and for the sake of the world, open your heart to hope. Amen.