

**“Fluffy Christmas, Part One”
Courage Church, Detroit, MI.
December 4, 2016**

We are going to start a mini series today... Two parts. And there is not even going to be time for me to extend it beyond two weeks because three Sunday's from now is our family Christmas service, which is going to be amazing fun! The kids and adults will all be together, every kid that is here is going to get a present, and we have selected a few families that we are adopting for

“Joy to the D” and we are really working to give them just a really great Christmas this year.



But the mini series is going to be based on three passages, and we will look them all over them in a moment... if you want to put your fingers in the places in the bible now, they are found in: Isaiah 9, Matthew 2, and Luke 2.

We will read all of them this week and again next week.

Beginning by reading the same passage that we read the first week all year in 2016. I think said then, that we would likely end the year with the same verse, and here we are, as the year is drawing to a close, right back on it. We have looked at it probably 4-5 times this year already, but we are going to look at it totally differently today, and then from another angle next week.

It is a Christmas passage. Which is what made it so strange that we looked at it in January. Because Christmas had just ended, and that was when we busted out Isaiah 9...

But it also is a passage about great change... drastic change... Change that was coming and could not be stopped.

But the pattern throughout history is that great change never comes about with ease. There are always breaking points... thresholds that have to be overcome, and people who have to allow themselves to be used by God to move that change forward. Something almost always has to change in us before we can be a part of changing the world. And that is where we find ourselves today.

The prophet Isaiah writes what is now considered to be one of the most famous and treasured Christmas passages in the bible, Isaiah chapter 9. But in Isaiah chapter 8, we read about the type of world that he was living in when he gave the prophecy that he gives in chapter 9. The Assyrian empire was about to invade Israel, and things were going to get pretty dark for a while... and that is where we pick up, in Isaiah chapter 9 starting in verse two, and reading through verse seven:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.

You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

*For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.*

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;*
and **the government shall be upon *his* shoulder,**
and his name shall be called

*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Okay, so what Isaiah does here, is he points backwards, to a story we find in the book of Judges, and he points us forward, to a story recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke... now, if you would, turn with me to Matthew 2:16-20.

Herod Kills the Children

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

The Return to Nazareth

19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.”

now, finally, turn your bibles to Luke 2:1

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be **registered**.”

after reading all of those scriptures it is no wonder that we are calling our mini series “Fluffy Christmas”

lets pray

There are two things that we have to understand before we study this... and this will take us every bit of today and next week to cover.

But the first thing that you have to realize, and this will be the theme of today's message, is that you are not saved because of anything that you did.

In fact, there is nothing that you can do. Which is the main reason that the gospel of Jesus Christ is so offensive to people... It is inclusive to everyone who will accept it, but it is exclusive in the way that it is only for the people who know that without it, they are broken.

which a lot of people are offended by, because they think that they are good.

The gospel is: that it was on our darkest day that Jesus gave us a light, as Isaiah puts it. And we didn't do anything to receive that light. It came as a gift.

The first thing that Jesus said when he gave us the beatitudes is "blessed are the poor in Spirit" which means "blessed are you when you come to the point in your life when you realize that you are a mess, and you will never be able to clean yourself up on your own."

It is counter intuitive to everything our world teaches. Every other religion is based on the morality of its members... It is based on the things that you do for the god that you worship. But Christianity is about what God did for us.

It is backwards. It is upside down.

and the story of Jesus' birth is one of the most vivid examples that we get of just how upside down the gospel that we believe really is.

That the Son of God would come as a vulnerable baby, a child that is utterly defenseless... and grow up living amongst the broken people that he would one day die to save.

and Throughout Jesus' entire ministry, his disciples were constantly trying to figure out when he was going to take over the government. They thought that they were following a King, who would physically and literally rule the world in their lifetime.

and so, many of them walked away from the cross, on the day that Jesus was crucified, believing that everything they had followed was a lie.

They never understood, even though Jesus had told them over and over, that His Kingdom wasn't going to come through violence. It wasn't going to come by Jesus or any of his followers running for President. It wasn't going to come through building empires and taking over colonies.

His Kingdom would come by serving.

By meeting people in the broken places of their hearts, and showing them that "no matter what you have done... that Jesus meets you right where you are."

The gospel of grace is that first verse we read in Isaiah "a light has come, that you did nothing to receive."

But the gospel of the Kingdom tells us that though we did *nothing*, now, we do have a job to do.

It is the job of the church, the body of Christ, to let that light shine through us every day of our lives.

The light that says, "no matter what you have done, and no matter where you find yourself today, God loved you so much that he sent his only Son as a gift, to die for you."

But the church throughout time has distorted that message; and the same grace that we have so willingly accepted we have been stingy to give.

Because unless someone is struggling with the same things that we struggle with, we tend to think that the sins in their life is bigger than the

sins in ours because we have a human complexity that allows us to believe that we deserve something that others don't.

But the message of Christmas is that all have sinned. All are walking in darkness... But behold, a light has shined through the darkness... a child has been given, and in him and him alone there is *life*. That is Christmas.

and we read some of those words in Isaiah, and if you are like me... you are probably thinking, "I don't usually hear Christmas described that way..." or you read the second passage that we read, the one in Matthew about Herod killing the boys under two, it is a passage that we all know happened, but we usually leave it out when we think and talk about Christmas... or at least we don't spend a lot of time on it. but if Paul's words are true, and the entirety of the bible is all the inspired word of God and is profitable for us, then:

Why don't we talk about what happened here?

but that answer is obvious, isn't it?

Because we love the fluffy Christmases. The ones that make us feel warm and fuzzy. The ones where we drink hot Chocolate by a Christmas tree set up beside a warm wood burning fireplace reading the story of the birth of Jesus out of Luke chapter 2.

and that *is* Christmas. And it is hope. Utter hope.

But this is Christmas too.

Because just like Isaiah said when he was prophesying about the birth of Jesus, before that light would come... the people would experience a great darkness. They were dwelling in the land of deep darkness.

And Isaiah parallels several worlds throughout history in his prophecy all with one common theme... God's Kingdom breaking through during times in history when governments were ruling through fear and violence.

We don't have enough time between here and Christmas to totally dissect this passage in Isaiah, so we are going to first give it a quick overview, then today we will focus on Verse 4-6, and then next week we will look closer at 6 and 7.

First, a little context on what was going on when Isaiah wrote this.

Something that happens a lot in Old Testament prophecy, is what they will do is they will use a situation that had already happen, to give a visual to what is going to come. And that is what Isaiah does here, in verse 4. And you will have to kind of hang with this one a little. Because Isaiah points in all these different directions, to stories that lead to other stories that all point to the same thing in different ways.

and in the middle of all of that, Isaiah also had a very present reality that he was writing through.

Isaiah was facing the threat of Assyria. The same empire that we studied when we studied the book of Jonah.

So Isaiah was facing the reality of an Assyrian invasion, and in order to comfort and encourage Israel, he pointed BACK to the story of a man named Gideon, who was facing the Midianites... and he points forward, to the story of Jesus, who would be born during the Tyrannical reign of Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire.

Verse 4-5 in Isaiah 9 says this:

you have broken as on the day of Midian.

*5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.*

*6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;*

So at this moment in the prophecy, Isaiah points us forward to something... to a child being born, but before pointing us forward, first he points us to something that had *already* happened.

and we will mostly today focus on what Isaiah looks back to, and next week we will spend more of our time looking at what he says is coming, and the kind of world it was that Jesus would be born into.

And when you read this verse in Isaiah, this sounds ugly, probably even worse when you say it aloud... But what we don't realize is that this right here is the gospel, and I will show you how.

you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Midian is a place that Israel *defeated*, under the leadership of a man named Gideon. You can read about it in Judges chapter 7. I am going to read a little bit of it to you.

You have probably heard this story a thousand times if you grew up in church, but maybe you never made the connection.

Gideon had a pretty large army, it starts with about 32,000 men.. enough to, it would seem, at least hold your own in any battle against anyone.

but look at what God says to Gideon in Judges 7:1-3 -

Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of **Harod**. And the camp of Midian was north of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.

² The Lord said to Gideon, "The people with you are *too many* for me to give the Midianites into their hand, **lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'** ³ Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.' " Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained.

Okay. If this isn't the perfect example of an upside down Kingdom, then I don't know what it. God literally tells Gideon that his enormous army, obviously a good size for overtaking their enemies, has *too many* men. When everybody else was trying to build the biggest army that they

possibly could, and is using those armies to invade other places and cultures and push their agendas on others... God says,

“just to show you how upside-down my Kingdom works, I want you to do the opposite!”

Now,

Just an observation, and I have no idea if these are connected but I found this so strange... The story that the prophecy in Isaiah points *back to*, before pointing forward to the birth of Jesus, begins with Gideon and his army encamped at a place called Harod. Years later, in the story that Isaiah points AHEAD TOO... a King named Herod (with an E not an A) is willing to commit genocide to stop the baby Jesus from growing up and coming to power. But the Hebrew word *Harod* (חַרְדֵי) found here in Judges literally means “to tremble, to take trouble or to worry. or TO BE TERRIFIED.” - all the emotions that King Herod certainly caused every in family in Bethlehem with a young son during his reign of terror to feel.

So Gideon finds himself at this place called Harod...

Which is also interesting, because what happens is God tells Gideon “send home the ones who are terrified.”

And then Gideon sends 22,000 of them home, keeping for his army 10,000.

Which still seems like an awful lot of men to take into battle, but I am sure that it made Gideon nervous.

See, Gideon is the guy who is already a nervous wreck. He was the one that (Judges 6) was found hiding in a winepress beating wheat in an unconventional place so that he could avoid his enemies.

He is just like everyone else who lives their lives fearful of the world around them. Fearful of a thousand things that could go wrong... Pretty much every person involved in the Christmas story... the birth of Jesus Christ, all of them have nerves to calm.

John the Baptist is Jesus' cousin... when Mary and John's mother Elizabeth was with Mary while they were both pregnant, when John the baptist heard Mary's voice he leaped in the womb.

But when the news first came to Zechariah, John's Father, that Elizabeth was going to have a child, What is the first thing that the angel says to Zechariah? Before He told him the news of her pregnancy?

Fear not.

What is the first thing that the angel says to Mary, a 14 year old virgin who was pregnant with the Son of God?

Fear Not.

What is the first thing that the angel says to Joseph?

Fear Not. And then the angel tells Joseph that Mary is pregnant and that they shall call his name "Emmanuel, which means God *with* us."

But those are all part of the story that Isaiah points *too*. In Isaiah 9, that is all *coming*. But to give us a window into it, he points us backward, to Gideon.

And when the angel came to Gideon, Gideon was hiding.

He was being a coward.

Threshing wheat in a winepress. Winepresses in those days often were dug in the ground. It was a hiding spot. You thresh wheat in open areas... in open air... so the wind can blow away the chaff. Instead he was doing it inside a winepress, hiding the wheat from the Midianites and he was totally afraid of them. But then the angel of the Lord calls him, and he when he does, he tells Gideon that he is a "Mighty man of valor, the Lord is with him!" The angel of the Lord does something amazing...

he speaks to a coward, but he speaks to him as what he was called to be, not as he was living in that moment. He says to a man hiding like a coward “you are a mighty man of valor!” and then he says “The Lord is with you.”

Very similar to what the angel said to Joseph... you will name Him Emmanuel... which means “God with us.”

But Gideon responds and says, “if God is with me, then why is he letting all of this happen to us?”

Why are the Midianites after us? Why are we at war? Why are we losing? Why has it come to *this*?

Isaiah points back to this and I can't help if maybe he wonders... If God is with us, *now*... why is Assyria taking over everything?

The people of Bethlehem, whom Isaiah points *ahead too*... I am sure it was easy for someone who didn't have a child under two to say “Emmanuel... God with us?” But where is God, when Herod is coming for our children?

and when you put *yourself* in the story, what does it become then?

Someone says that too you... “Emmanuel... God with us”

and all you can think is, “If God is with us, then why is my family so broken?” “Why is my family so broke?”

“Why is Detroit so broken?” “Why is Detroit so broke?”

“Why aren't we further along yet?”

“Why haven't we gotten a house yet?”

“Why are people still hurting each other?”

“Why does Flint, just an hour up the road from us still not having clean drinking water?” “Why are people being forced out of their country by ruthless killers and not accepted anywhere they go? Why are people still being killed for the color of their skin?”

I loved the TV show prison break... I probably shouldn't even say that because there may be things in there that are not the best... I don't remember, it has been years since I have seen it. But they are making another season, and I am excited for it... its coming out in a couple of months... because the trailer shows us that Michael Scofield, the main character is actually still alive.

But in the show, on the last episode, it shows everyone at his grave, implying that he died, and on his grave is written these words, and this is a very famous saying but I always think of Prison Break now when I hear it... it says on his grave: Be the change you want to see in the world.

and thats a great thing to say... but where does the idea come from?

Gideon is talking to the Lord hear... and I love that Gideon, a man who was painted up until that point as a coward, would now even say something so bold to God. Something we all have felt from time to time:

WHERE ARE YOU GOD?

And I love what happens... I love this response. And I never noticed this until this weekend when I was reading this over.

the bible says that “The Lord” (so now it is the LORD) then turns to Gideon and says “Go in **this might of yours** and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?”

Think about that.

God says: Gideon... I have given you everything that you need to solve this problem. Go in the might that I have given you.

Gideon: you are the answer. You are it.

How dare we blame God for problems that we can solve?

God solved our problem. God solved the *sin* problem. God gave us everything, and we screwed it all up, and now we are mad at him because we expect him to fix everything, while we are selfish with the things that we have that would actually contribute to fixing it? That makes no sense!

God tells Gideon “its you!” You are the change!

So that is the story of what lead Gideon to this moment on Harod, and he sends home 22,000 men who are scared for their lives.

Then, as the story continues, God tells Gideon that he still had too many men, so this time he gives the men a test, and he takes them down to the water and has them drink from it... and all of those who got on their knees and drank the water like a dog would drink it was also sent home. Anyone who put their face to the water was gone.

Only the ones who cupped the water and brought it up to them would be the ones that went with Gideon to battle.

2700 drank like dogs. 300 cupped the water with their hands and brought it up to their mouths.

So now Gideon has an army of 300 men.

And he divides up the army into three companies, and gives each man a trumpet and a jar with a torch in it.

Trumpets, and torches. No weapons.

Gideon lead an army of 300 men to take on Midian, and those 300 men defeated an entire army without even having to step foot into the battle.

What they did, was: They blew their trumpets and smashed their jars and waved their torches, and they cried out “**A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!**” but all the while, none of them even had swords!

and the whole thing drove the Midianites so crazy that they started attacking each other.

And THAT is how Midian fell.
That is what Isaiah points back to.

A moment in history when God told his servants, “you do your part, and I will do mine... and really, your part is just to let me be GOD. and my part is to be God.” You don’t have to do anything. Besides putting your trust in me, and being willing.

Then Isaiah says:

*For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.*

This is some pretty strange wording. But what it is essentially saying is the same thing... that all of the things that you think that you can put on yourself to prepare for battle are all destined to burn.

And you don’t need them.

You don't need the boots. You don’t need the uniform.

That is the world system. That is how Assyria did it. They prepared for invasions, and they invaded. That is how Midian did it... that is how Rome was going to do it. That is how things got done in the days of Caesar Augustus and by Herod.

But that is not the way that God does it.

and it was in days like that... when everything looked like the world would be both changed, and ruled, by the governments that were built the strongest, that God decided to change the world, by sending a gift.

Did you hear that? When the world was being taken over by men who killed for power... all they did was take. take. take. From anyone who had anything that they wanted, and from anyone who got in the way of them getting more.

and when THAT was the system that people knew was working,

God changes the world not by taking *anything*, but by giving us a gift.

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is **given**;*

He is given.

To us. For free.

and there is nothing more important than realizing how free it is. Because the moment that you start to think that you did something to earn it, it becomes evident that **you don't have it**.

Consider this. God said to Gideon when he still had 32,000 men in his army: you guys have enough men to win the battle, but I want to show you, that you don't need to do anything... and you will still win. In fact, it has to be that way... otherwise, you will think that YOU did something, to deserve what I have given you.

All you have to do is *be mine*, and you will win.

Sounds an awful lot like Paul when he says (Ephesians 2:8) "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the *gift* of God"

Everything that you have been given is a gift.

and this is where the problem ultimately lies... The problems in our world. The things that we blame God for. The injustices. If you truly understood how valuable, and how life changing and world changing and how INCLUSIVE the gift was, then **you would be the solution.**

When you realize... okay, so there is NOTHING that I can do to save myself... but there IS something that I can do to save others. It does NOTHING for my salvation, but it does something for theirs. That is when our lives will actually reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I read once, that if you combined the wealth of the 400 richest people in the world you would have enough money to give clean drinking water to every human being in the entire world and still have enough left over, that all 400 of them would still be billionaires.

Now, I am not saying that the water problem is on *them*... we can't go around blaming the world's problems on other people, that does no good, and a lot of the people who have the most money are doing a lot of good.

but What I am saying that it is on me. And it is on you. I am not responsible for them I am only responsible for me, my family, and for what I teach to you... but the point of even saying that is that is this: the resources are out there. Everything needed to bring physical "Shalom" to the world, is in our world right now.

God has not withheld.

We have withheld.

Gideon asked God, "where are you?" And God essentially responded "Where are you Gideon? Because I have given you the strength to do this!"

God made everything perfect. We screwed it up. And God still gave us every resource to fix it, and we are using those resources to buy a bunch of stuff to feed our fleeting desires thinking they will leave us full.

But (Proverbs 27:20) “Death and Destruction are never satisfied, so neither are our human desires.” So you gain, and you *keep*, and you feed yourself but you are still hungry, because none of it will fill you.

We value things that aren't valuable.

And the greatest gift of all we hold on to like we are thankful for it, but not like we understand it.

We value things that are all going to burn up, and all the while God is saying... Here... Here... Here is Jesus. This is my beloved Son. This is what is going to change the world. The government will be on his shoulder. Do what he says and the whole world will change.

It is the greatest gift ever given.

Jesus tells a parable (Matthew 13:44) about how great the Kingdom of heaven is, and he says it is like a treasure that is hidden in the field... and a man found it and right away he knew... this is worth everything.

If I have this, I have everything. and if I don't have this, then I have nothing anyway.

So as evidence for how valuable this treasure is, the man went and SOLD EVERY SINGLE THING THAT HE OWNED, so that he would have enough money to buy that field. And he didn't think twice about it.

One verse later Jesus tells a similar parable (Matthew 13:45) of a man who was a pearl merchant... and he knew the good pearls from the bad worthless pearls...

and when he saw this particular pearl, the pearl that represents the Kingdom of Heaven in the parable... the man left, he went home and sold literally everything that he owned, and he came back and bought it.

yes, it is a gift... but if you believe that it is worth what it actually is worth, then you are willing to give up everything for that gift.

But the thing that is so great about this pearl, is you can have it, and so can everybody else.

It is the transformational power of the Christ... that should inspire us to be the ones who stand in the gap for the broken...

who defend the widow. Who opens our homes to the strangers. To be generous out of our own poverty and our own uncertain situations. Because those are the things that show people what Jesus looks like.

In a world that has no idea.

We can complain about our world or we can be the difference...

Because the gospel broke forth through the birth of the Christ during one of the darkest times in human history, and it is breaking forth through the church of Jesus Christ, today.

So let's be vessels of that light shining in the darkest places this Christmas season.