

God's Love: in Christ, in You

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Isaiah 11:1-10

This vision of peace and love we heard from Isaiah still has power to move our imaginations—even these 2600 years later. God's love lived out in a harmony which encompasses all the earth: the wolf lying down with the lamb, the little child wandering safely among them, even the lion, a carnivore, turns into a passive straw-eater who grazes contentedly with the ox. (Their offspring also lie down together—this idyllic scene is not an aberration, but shall remain, generation after generation. And Woody Allen surely missed the point when he observed, “the lion may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb isn't going to get much sleep.”)

Even the hope-crazed prophet Isaiah was not so naïve as to think this would all just fall into place. In the first verse, we heard him speak of the shoot or branch springing out of the dead stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David—David the first king of the united Israel, and the one who wanted to build the first temple for God. God promised him that instead, God would make sure that the “House of David” or royal family of David would forever rule. There was no shortage of feckless and unfaithful descendants of David who ruled—but God was promising not that David's descendants would all be faithful to the promise—rather, that somehow God would be.

If we want to celebrate this Christmas season with any real conviction; if we want to celebrate the reign of this royal son of David born in the city of David—the One whose love was and is supposed to make such a difference in the world—it seems fair that we ask one simple question: If God is so all-loving and all-powerful, why hasn't God caused this ancient Christmas card vision of Isaiah's to become true by now? What are we still waiting for?

I God's love limits God's power.

Human power, which tends to be external and coercive, can be less constrained. Humans could build the World Trade Center—no small accomplishment—and humans can build commercial jetliners. And humans without much trouble could destroy both. Julius Caesar could win battles and legislate and threaten and make slaves generally behave—and build up quite an Empire in the process. Human power can generally get things done, for better and for worse—but human power has trouble moving anyone on the inside.

Goodness knows we have trouble moving even ourselves

on the inside. Imagine some of the most powerful people who have ever lived, all rolled into one. Imagine someone with the military power of a Hitler. With the artistic power of a Van Gogh. With the celebrity power of a Lady Gaga (this month). With the intellectual power of a Stephen Hawking and the financial power of a Bill Gates. With the charisma of President Bill Clinton.

This person might conceivably control quite a few things—perhaps the economy, perhaps the military, perhaps the media—maybe all three, and more. He or she might be able to conquer the world—but could not conquer the yearnings and wanderings of his or her own heart. No one of us can satisfy our own deepest longings: for love, for deep peace, for meaning. At the root of our deepest longings, whether we use religious-sounding language or not, is the desire for communion with God. A hunger we can never satisfy for ourselves.

God's power is constrained by God's love. God, unlike Caesar, is not content to appease people with bread and circuses, or like Hitler to make the trains run on time. God is not interested primarily in legislating behavior through institutions or laws. God is intent on remaking people from the inside out. And only love can change people from the inside out.

Love cannot force people to choose to love the way humans can force people to behave; love can only create the situation or the relationship which another then chooses freely to enter into. Love can only inspire change, never force it. (I know that right now there are young children across the patio who are gladly doing what their Sunday School teachers are asking them to do (mostly)—not because the teachers are much taller and stronger than the little children and could bully them, but because the children know they are well loved and freely choose to obey.)

God's love respectfully grants us this freedom which is also free to ignore, deny, distort, even crucify the love of God. In this sense God's love overrides God's power to change the world, to bring about Isaiah's vision of “Shalom”, of God's harmony and love in action.

Another truth hiding behind the symbolic language of Isaiah is the fact that

II God's love is Personal: God's love is shown best in Jesus the Christ. God's love is not a cause, not an ideal,

not a generic force or energy. God's love is personal.

God's love is not some vague high ideal; something too beautiful to ever be experienced by schlubs like us who might sometimes even argue with our loved ones on the way to worship. God's love does not grow tired or give up on us: God's love keeps working with us and through us every day: in the midst of our flaws and our doubts and our disbelief and our sin. God's love, through His Holy Spirit, is available to us personally, every moment.

There's a huge difference between confessing "Jesus is Lord" and any other position. Jesus is not a "cause." Jesus is a person, that long-awaited son of David, whose Holy Spirit can be known, loved, heard, experienced, and obeyed. To get on board what I think must be the "Jesus cause" or "causes" before I have given my life and will to Jesus will inevitably lead in the end to something less than His will and His purpose. Jesus is not the cheerleader for this or that political vision; we, His people, begin with Jesus. We make Jesus our Reference Point. If I start with my own ideal, or my own cause, or even my own culture—liberal or conservative or other—soon enough I will be enlisting Christ to strengthen my agenda and my ideal.

[Was there ever a tyranny or fascism which did not start out proclaiming one ideal or another? Just about every abuse of power starts out sounding like an ideal, as a stated good. I suspect many leaders begin actually believing that their causes are worthy. Did not Chairman Mao and Karl Marx (or his friends Lenin and Stalin) believe they could usher in something like the era of peace Isaiah presented so long ago? Perhaps—anyway they convinced a lot of well-intending people. But see what has happened around the globe to all that idealism, and the hundred million people killed in the 20th Century alone in the name of progress and idealisms and "causes."]

Jesus had his chance to become political leader, and He refused. Do you remember, before He began His public ministry, how the enemy offered Him a political platform from which to do great good? [Mt 4:1-10] He could feed the people with bread and eliminate hunger; He could become ruler of the kingdoms of the world and rule with justice. Jesus refused. Had He not refused, imagine what He would be in today's frame of reference—Secretary General of the United Nations? President of the US or the World Bank? Chinese ambassador to the UN? No telling—but what we do know is that Jesus refused the way of the political revolution. He chose, instead, the way of personal relationship, beginning with you, and with me. (In fact, believe it or not, He called out His Church, His followers like you and me, to live out these relationships with Him and with others who call

Him "Lord;") He established His church to reflect His Kingdom to and for the world. He established Peter to be the head not of His political party or His benevolence society or His lobbying network—it was His Church that Jesus established upon Peter. I know it's a tall order to believe, when you good people came unsuspecting to church on a Sunday morning—but you and I, Christ's Church, are God's plan for bringing about that peaceful vision of Isaiah.)

God's love is also personal in that God loves individual persons. I think it's natural for us to love people in the abstract while never being particularly kind to the more annoying ones God puts in front of us every day.

Mother Teresa would often observe, "Welfare is for a purpose—an admirable and a necessary one—whereas Christian love is for a person." Hearing this, we can be sure we want to be careful not to direct our love only toward some ideal, toward billions of people far away who cost us little—but to those closest around us, who may cost us much. Those up-and-down relationships, those difficult people in front of our noses. God continues to love you and me, personally, when we play nice and when we don't; when we forget about God altogether and when we come back asking for forgiveness. God keeps loving us in all our imperfections, and we'll never outgrow all of those. This is how God loves us, personally; this is how the Spirit of God within us is going to love others, personally, through each of us.

God loves us when we are appreciative and when we are not. Jesus went all the way to the cross, giving up His life and everything else, while we were still unappreciative. (Paul writes, "But God proves his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, rebelling against Him, Christ died for us." [Romans 5:8] Brennan Manning tells a story likening Jesus and His going to the cross to another tree... (story by Shel Silverstein, I believe)

Once there was a tree...and she loved a little boy.
And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest.
He would climb her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples.
And when the boy was tired, he would sleep in her shade.
And the boy loved the tree...very much.
And the tree was happy.
But time went by.
And the boy grew older.
And the tree was often alone.
Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said,

"Come, Boy, and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy."

"I am too big to climb and play," said the boy.

"I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me some money?"

"I'm sorry," said the tree, "but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have some money and you will be happy."

So the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away.

And the tree was happy.

But the boy stayed away for a long time...and the tree was sad.

Then one day the boy came back and the tree shook with joy and she said, "Come, Boy, and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy."

"I'm too busy to climb trees," said the boy.

"I want a house to keep me warm," he said. "I want a wife and children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?"

"I have no house," said the tree. "The forest is my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy."

And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house.

And the tree was happy.

But the boy stayed away for a long time.

And when he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak.

"Come, boy," she whispered, "Come and play."

"I am too old and sad to play," said the boy.

"I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?"

"Cut down my trunk and make a boat," said the tree.

"Then you can sail away...and be happy."

So the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away.

And the tree was happy...but not really.

After a long time the boy came back again.

"I am sorry, Boy," said the tree, "but I have nothing left to give you. My apples are gone."

"My teeth are too weak for apples," said the boy.

"My branches are gone, said the tree. "You cannot swing on them."

"I am too old to swing on branches."

"My trunk is gone," said the tree. "You cannot climb."

"I am too tired to climb," said the boy.

"I'm sorry," said the tree. "I wish that I could give you something...but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry..."

"I don't need very much now," said the boy. "just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired."

"Well," said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could. "Well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, and sit down. Sit down and rest."

And the boy did.

And the tree was happy."

There is nothing left for God to give you and me that He has not given us in Christ.

God's love causes even God's power to be powerless. God's love is personal.

III God's love changes you.

God's love changes you to be more able to love and more able to be free.

It must be clear, in this story, that the tree did not love the boy, then the man, because he was so worthy and so appreciative. The tree simply loved. God simply loves. "While we were still sinners..." "This is love: not that we loved God but that He first loved us." [1 John 4:10]. God loved long before we were around to vote on His decision or His divine nature.

This is an important point: God decided to love you totally—before you were even part of the equation. If you're not clear about this, then you may be trying to stand on shaky emotional ground for the rest of your life. Your brain by now probably knows "Jesus loves me, this I know..."—but does your heart truly understand and trust and live from this enduring center, this sure foundation, that God loves you?

Have you ever feared that when others, maybe including even God, learn the real truth about you, they'll quit loving you? (I think about this a lot, and I cannot get altogether past it...) Have you ever tried to hide your inner self out of some sense of fear—maybe at least just a little? I do. Then surely you and I will be glad to hear again that Jesus assures us God loves us. God is love; Jesus is God's love in action. It has nothing to do with how good or bad you are. It's not about you. It has everything to do with God—"God is love" and God loves you personally.

Sensing and trusting and living in God's love for you will free you. It will free you from old habits and horizons. Jesus commands, for example, "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." [Mt 5:43-44] You no longer need be a hostage to those who treat you unjustly. You no longer have to simply react, or let them ruin your day or the rest of your life. You now have a choice.

Or "Love one another, just as I have loved you." [John 15:12] You are free to love appropriately, within

boundaries, rather than to keep pouring yourself down an emotional black hole. You do not need to allow any other person to control your welfare or your level of happiness. Someone else's desired claim on you does not need to obligate you. You are free to love—not be perpetually used or depleted or drained. God loves you. No other person needs to limit or define the meaning of your life any more. You are set free from all that, if you will trust the love of God in Jesus and be free.

“Love one another...” It doesn't matter whether the person in the pew behind you is particularly lovable or even likable. It doesn't matter that he has quirks that drive you batty, or that you quit being on the PTA board because she's the same mom who behaves so badly you cannot stand to be in the same room. You can get off that merry-go-round: in Christ's Church, you are free to love her anyway. In fact Jesus commands you to do so—you are no longer captive to her personality. You are free to respond differently—free live in that harmonious Kingdom of God which Isaiah was beginning to describe.

Not only that, you are free to love others with all of your self. No longer do you have to hedge your bets, hold back, be always subconsciously planning your exit strategy. You don't have to keep playing out in relationships today and for the rest of your life whatever happened or didn't happen to you in the past. God loves you: you may be free from all that.

God's love frees you to act responsibly toward others regardless of how they may act toward you. Willa Cather wrote a story called “The Burglar's Christmas.” A young man has drifted farther and farther away from his parents. He's moved out; hasn't been in touch with them for months. He's moved to many miles away from them—to the big city, Chicago. He's down on his luck: it's Christmas Eve and he has nothing: no money, no food, no family, no home. He decides to break into a house to get something to eat.

He's scared; he's never broken into a house before. Even in the darkness, however, he begins to realize everything in the building looks familiar. Soon enough, he realizes he has broken into his parent's home—they must have moved to Chicago also. In the act of burglary, the young man is confronted by his own mother, and his father soon joins them. He confesses that he has done great wrong, and tries to hurry away.

It's Christmas Eve; his parents ask him to stay. They tell him that things can be made right. He looks at his mother and says, “I wonder if you know how much you pardon and forgive?”

“O, my poor boy,” she replies. “Much or little, what does

it matter? Have you wandered so far, and paid such a bitter price for knowledge, and not yet learned that love has nothing to do with pardon or forgiveness—that it only loves, and loves, and loves, and loves, and loves?”

Will you trust that God loves, and loves, and loves you? And that you are therefore free to love in His name?

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.