

LESSONS IN LIVING

Christmas and the 7 Secrets of Life Part 1: Life Grows out of Death

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:1-9, (The Inclusive Bible)

Well, it's advent season again, and one of the great challenges of being a minister is coming up with something new every advent. There are only so many things you can say about a shepherd, there is only so many times you can give the sermon, "He was the littlest donkey in the manger....." and you run out of those kinds of things to say. I thought what might be a fun part of the season is to look at the images of Christmas as symbols of the deep life process...which is really what religion should be all along. It's the symbols of the deep, deep processes of life, the truths of life, the things we can count on through our lives.

I ran across a book years and years ago called "Seven Mysteries of Life." It was written by a scientist who had spent his entire life studying reality from molecules up. He wrote this book and he talked about all the things that were mysteries to him at the end of his time of being a scientist - what he considered to be the seven most mysterious aspects of reality. I didn't use the same seven, but I thought this might be a good format for talking [about Christmas and life] His name is Guy Murchie if you want to look the book up. "Seven Mysteries of Life." It's very different from the sermon series, but it is what inspired it.

I want to start the season with ripping off another minister. (*laughter*) His name is Edward Markquart, and I ran across this beginning to a sermon on the web.

"Wouldn't it be nice if there wasn't so much killing going on right now in Iraq? Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it be nice if the Muslims and Christians in the Sudan would miraculously start to live together in peace? Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it be nice if there were no death squads in Columbia, or people weren't shooting each other? Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it be nice if there were peace on earth, or if you can't have peace between nations, wouldn't it be nice to have peace within our families? Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it be nice to have a whole week together as husband and wife and not have a fight? Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it be nice if your children didn't fight with each other? Wouldn't it be nice to go on a family vacation and not have any blowups? Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it be nice if tempers didn't flare so quickly, like a match that suddenly ignites? If we can't have peace in Iraq, maybe we could have peace at home and in our families? Wouldn't that be nice? Or if that isn't possible, wouldn't it be nice to have peace within myself? Wouldn't it be nice if I weren't so harsh with myself? Wouldn't it be nice if I didn't explode at myself in anger? Wouldn't it be nice if my guts were calm? Wouldn't it be nice if I could sit around all night and not have the compulsion to eat ice cream or drink wine or beer in order to calm my nervous stomach? Wouldn't that be nice?"

Well, he goes on like that. The point I want to take from that is that while every person on the planet wants peace at all those levels, for some reason we can't seem to get it. Probably, throughout history everybody

wanted peace within themselves, peace in their families, peace in their nations, and peace among the nations and yet what is rarer than that? What the prophets do and come to try to reach us and tell us is this: *the things we hate are coming from the things we love*. Those things we see in the world that horrify us are growing organically out of the things that make us feel safe and comfortable. As sectarian religious people, as nations, that the very things we are using to feel safe - the armies, the prisons, the police forces, all of the laws, all those things we are using to try to get a handle on violence – those things, at some level, seem to breed violence as well.

The prophets come and tell us some things we don't want to hear at first, because in order to get a true hope, we have to let go of the false hopes. That's very scary. Now Isaiah is probably the most censored author of Christmas. When we, the church, clip out parts of Isaiah, we take out all the political parts. We want to talk about the baby in the manger, we want to talk about King Herod and all that kind of stuff, but we don't want any implications to the world today. So we only quote certain parts. Today we are going to be looking at the whole quote...because the joy that we feel at Christmas could be a permanent way of life, if the roots went deep. It's the fact that we keep the roots superficial and don't look at the implications for how we live the rest of the year, that we have a couple of weeks a year of joy and this excitement of being alive. Then we know the rest of the year is going to be a desert. So we are going to look at Isaiah as one of those predictions of Christmas that we really need to understand.

Now, there wasn't just one Isaiah, probably there were a lot of Isaiah's and they all got sewn together into one book. It can be confusing at times, but what we do know is the prophets usually appear as nations are getting in trouble. At first they come to say if you change your path you can avoid catastrophe, but at some point what they come to say is, it's too late to turn around. So you have to let go of certain identities and begin to orient a new way, a new idea of being a human being. Isaiah came at different times to different people, but the message as a whole says that the empire is real, it's coming to a close, and he speaks in a way that transcends all empires.

In the passage, if you look at the whole of Isaiah, it's a condemnation, not of one nation, but of all empires. It's a promise not just to one nation, but to all people all over the world. In the chapter right before this passage, Isaiah talks about God coming and cutting down all the trees. And what he is doing, he's not saying God is going to come and get an axe and actually cut down the trees, he is saying this is what's going to happen over time. These will be the results of that action and he puts God in that role. At this time there is deforestation taking place, literal deforestation. If you look at where Egypt is, there used to be forests. If you look at where Lebanon is, there used to be forests. What we call deserts are very often the footprints of former empires, because what happens is, people on the top go crazy and they stop caring what happens to the root system. As long as the disaster doesn't happen in their lifetimes, they are fine with it. And yet people keep trusting their leaders. What else can you do? That's what you are taught to do - surrender responsibility to your leaders. The only people who are objecting to that are these prophets that are coming forward. They would say, "love your nation enough to criticize it...love your religion enough to criticize it." So what Isaiah is going to do is first paint a very bleak picture, the chapter before this, and then in our chapter today, he paints the image of the stump there and says new life is going to come out of that stump. What looks like a dead end - politically, militarily, economically - is the beginning of something new and exciting, painful, yes, but exciting, too.

I think the words may have some implications for us as well, even kind of hauntingly so. What Isaiah is going to do is say that people are hoping a new hero is going to come down the pike, from the line of David, and in a sense what Isaiah is saying is that line is broken in terms of physical relationship, but there is someone coming who will be in the spirit of David, not in the spirit of empire, but in the longings that began the nation Israel. It's not going to look like Israel, it's not going to sound like Israel, it won't look like a king. In fact, quite to the contrary, the image that's drawn is not of a king. In the story of Israel, what's often forgotten is when Israel decides to get a king, God is not happy about that. That's kind of left out of the story. When Israel decides to build the temple, God is not happy with that. You may not have heard

that particular passage, but when Israel wants to build this temple to give praise to God, God says “I’m doing just fine. I don’t need your house. I’m doing just fine without a nation, without a church.” So it starts off a new situation. Israel had never been in that situation before. They couldn’t keep doing what they had done before. Then they had a new vision of what it means to be a human being. A universal human being. The words are incredible. Listen to this:

“When you see the baby in the manger, remember Isaiah.”

It’s talking about the shoot from the stump of Jesse, and speaking to that one who is coming.

“You won’t judge by appearances, or make decisions by hearsay. You will treat poor people with fairness and will uphold the rights of the land’s downtrodden.”

Does that sound like Christmas to you? Because, that’s the original Christmas.

“With the single word you will strike down tyrants.”

See the messiah is not just one person, the messiah is anyone who hears this message and takes it to the world in your own way, however you can. If we don’t stand up for the vulnerable, the weak, the poor, the children, the elderly, people with disabilities, the people of a minority part of the population, they are eaten by the powerful and rich. That’s the image that Isaiah is painting. He is calling a remnant, a small group of people, to come out of the major religion, the major traditions, the major part of the nation and stand up for everybody. That is the calling that is here. Then he says

“When you do that, then the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat. The calf and the lion cub will graze together, and a little child will lead them.”

Isaiah keeps going back to this image of the little child and that is what you are seeing in the Christmas manger. What it is saying, I think - and the world has never been like that: You put a lion and a lamb in the same cage and you know what’s going to happen. Lions can’t go vegetarian. (*laughter*) They can’t. This isn’t talking about that kind of naive escapism. It is saying that when you live the life that’s noble, that’s what your heart is going to feel like. It will be in balance and the struggles of the world, the pains of the world will be balanced by the life that you are living and the gift that you’re giving. (I didn’t mean that to rhyme, but it did).

Let’s update this, let’s move forward in time. Can you think of any other empires that are dying right now? We may not want to think of it that way, but somebody’s got to be thinking down the road about the lives our children are going to have or *their* grandchildren or *their* grandchildren. We don’t know what, when, where. But who is thinking like that? Who cares about the weak and the poor as much as they care about the rich and the famous? If you watch television, if you read magazines, you probably don’t. We are being propagandized to see them [the rich and famous] as more important than us. This week the President hurt his lip playing basketball and he got more coverage than all the blood that’s been shed in Afghanistan since the beginning of the war, at least on the other side. In Texas every week, 2.5 workers die simply because the working conditions are dangerous, and your elected officials will lower those safety standards so some people can make more money.

Isaiah is saying, that’s not the way it should be. Do you remember the memoir of Bush, if you’ve read it or at least seen excerpts of it, he talks about the worst moments of his presidency. It gives you kind of an idea of the different sense of weights that the rich and famous have of what’s valuable and what’s important. He said the worst moment in his presidency was when the rapper said that he (Bush) didn’t care about people of color. This was related to Katrina, so it wasn’t Katrina that was the worst moment, it wasn’t 9/11, it wasn’t the people he sent to their deaths over something that turned out to be a mistake, it was that someone insulted

a rich and famous person. *Oh, the humanity!* But, you see, if you watch television without the sermon, that's how you're going to see the world. What is the rich person doing today? What are the famous people doing today? Tomorrow's newspaper - just open it and see whose eyes are you looking through when you read the Austin American Statesman? Not the poor, not the weak, but the rich and famous. That does something to us. When you read an economist, most economists are a sub-species of lap dog. They live on the laps of the rich. Poor people can't pay their salary. Right? So when you read most economists, they are working for somebody and it's not the poor...most of them! So they are apologists for an economic system and they don't really put the misery and the blood of the poor on the table and weigh it. They also don't seem to notice that the environment underneath the economic system is kind of important. They look at the environment in the context of the economy. Do you realize that's insanity? Do you realize that if we poison the earth because it's more economic, we die? There is this insane death spiral taking place and we are all in a trance. We are all hoping someone from the outside will come and save our children from being poisoned.

Isaiah is saying, "You're it. Tag. You are it." That's what Jesus said. What I do, and greater things you will do. Take my message, my voice out into the world. Speak for the weak and the downtrodden. You may not know what to do. Even brooding on it is *doing something* - emotionally going through this. When a chicken is sitting on an egg, it is doing something. So even when you don't know what to do, to think about these things deeply, emotionally, is to begin to process and is to begin to move in the direction that needs to take place. When you numb yourself to this, and I understand it, but who is going to rescue the children? It's not going to be the rich. In the history of the world they have never laid it down. They can't. It's like expecting a crack addict to show discernment. It's intoxicating to be rich and to be famous. They are not different kind of people than us. But somebody has to go out and speak and shout and sing and protest and march and do all the things it takes to stand up for the poor.

Where does the power come from and the strength come from? From a new view of what a human being is, and a new understanding of your relationship to the earth. The stump that gives birth is a very Jewish concept. We grow out of the earth. In the Greek world which we inherited, we are spirits that are brought into the planet earth. We are coming from a different direction. God is someplace else and comes down on a helicopter. In the Jewish system we come and grow out of the earth, we are shaped out of the earth. That's sanity. That is sanity. We are children of the earth and we must protect our roots. When you are propagandized, your culture teaches that water comes from a faucet, and eggs come from cartons. Then when you feel threatened you want to protect the economic system that brings you those things. When you become sane and realize that food comes from the Earth, and water comes from the ocean then you will protect those things. And you will do it with great vigor because you will know what's riding on it.

So, there is a shoot growing from the stump. One of the secrets of life is realizing that what we call *life* comes from what we call *death*. What we call organic is coming from what we call inorganic. They are inextricably linked together. We can't neglect one side of that equation without poisoning the other side of the equation. There is a great story in mythology where Hercules is wrestling a guy named Antaeus. Now, Antaeus, (we get the word ant from Antaeus), was a child of the earth. Hercules wasn't used to losing a wrestling match. He is losing this wrestling match until he realizes that Antaeus is getting his power from the Earth. So all he has to do is lift Antaeus up and the power drains. That may be our situation, too. If we are feeling powerless and hopeless, it may be that rooting ourselves down into our common humanity and the Earth will be exactly what it takes to feel our power again.

When you look down the road and you say well, I can do these things and it won't change anything ultimately, let me ask you this: Do you do this with a meal? Do you say there is no point in eating lunch because I'm just going to be hungry at the end of it? When you get a cold do you say why should I go to the doctor? I'm going to die anyway. Of course not. But you are propagandized into helplessness. This is the life that's worth living. It's the song your heart has always sung at it's depth, at it's essence. Isaiah is singing nothing but that. "You won't judge by appearances or make decisions by hearsay. You will treat poor people with fairness and uphold the rights of the land's downtrodden. With a single word you will

strike down tyrants.” Then the unbelievable part. “Then the wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the young goat. And a child will lead them.” The world has never been like that *externally*, will probably never be like that *externally*, but it can be like that in your heart this day and every day, when you care about your entire human family and you root yourself into the Earth.

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14311 Wells Port Drive, Austin, Texas 78728 • (512) 251-0698 • Fax: (512) 251-2617

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