

December 13, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

A Servant is Born: "Born for All"

Isaiah 49:5-6, 60:1-6

David A. Renwick

In our sermons during the month of Advent, the four weeks that are leading up to Christmas, we're focusing on the last Chapters of the book of the prophet Isaiah. This is a book that was written somewhere between 500 and 800 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and it speaks, especially in the last few chapters of, about a servant who is coming into the world: the advent (or the "coming") of a servant, coming into the world, sent by God, born into the world to do God's work.

When the first Christians the early Christians read these particular chapters of Isaiah, they placed them side by side with the life and the death and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and very quickly said to themselves "this servant and this Jesus, these two are one and the same." They declared without any uncertainty that Jesus was the servant of Isaiah; and vice versa! . . . that the servant in Isaiah was none other than Jesus.

- So when, for example, the servant speaks like this in Isaiah 50 saying
 - *The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher . . .* they say, "That's, that's Jesus! Our Jesus"
 - *. . . that I may know how to sustain the weary with the word . . .* they say, "Did he do that? He did that all the time!"
 - *. . . morning by morning he wakens, wakens my ear to listen . . .* "Powerful though he was he listened to us!"
 - *. . . listens as those who were taught.* "This is the Jesus, they said, "that we know, the servant in Isaiah."
- And when they read a description of this servant in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah that goes like this: *Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases yet we counted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted but he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was laid the chastisement that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed.* When they read that they said, "This too is our Jesus – on the cross suffering and dying for us. The servant in Isaiah is none other than the Jesus we have known in flesh and blood born in humility, born in a manger, born to heal, willing to stoop to any depths of degradation and suffering to accomplish God's purpose. Can it possibly be? Who would have imagined this to be the case – to bring us healing, to bring healing for your

life and my life? To our souls? To our relationship with God? To our relationship with others with whom we live?”

Of course to say this, to make these statements is to make not just one big assumption but two.

The first big assumption is to follow those first Christians and to say, “Ah yes, the servant in Isaiah is Jesus. The two are one. And we come to know who Jesus is, and what he intended to accomplish, by looking back all those years to Isaiah.

I believe that assumption to be absolutely true. Throughout the New Testament, the first Christians turned to the last few chapters of Isaiah repeatedly to understand who Jesus was, especially in his suffering.

But there is another assumption in that statement – that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, and that he came to heal *us*! Not just that he was the Messiah, but that he was the Messiah who came for *us*! Did he really? Did he come for you? Did he come for me? Do we move to that conclusion too quickly, that *we* are in *the us* for whom he came? To say this is to make a huge assumption that we are on the inside and not the outside, that we’ve been included in the purpose of this servant coming into the world, and not excluded; or that we’re fully in and not just half in (sometimes it’s more painful to be half in than on the outside! Not quite there and always told we don’t quite belong).

One of the most painful things in life is to make the assumption that we are in, that the party is for us and to find that the invitation did not come our way; that in the end we weren’t in that inner group at all; we find ourselves on the stoop not being able quite to get in the door.

In fact a couple of years ago Dustin Petty at Michigan State University wrote an article on bullying in schools. Much bullying in schools these days (and unfortunately it’s alive and well), has to do with shame and using little gadgets, like the phones we all have in our pockets to spread messages about other children which they want to keep private, – spreading them to others and creating shame in children. It’s a terrible problem: shaming. But what Dustin Petty adds is this, is that another huge part of bullying these days has to do with the devastating use of the power of exclusion. (see <http://news.jrn.msu.edu/bullying/2012/03/27/a-new-bullying-social-exclusion/>)

In the article Dustin Petty interviews Dr. Edyth Wheeler of Towson University who believes that the knowledge of this power begins very very early in life. She writes this – *that even four-year-olds are masters at this. When they say I'm not going to be your friend anymore they're exercising the power of exclusion. They're making the threat of exclusion. They don't primarily learn this from their parents, but rather they somehow know it innately, that they and their peers want to be accepted and let in. So as an act of power they choose to accept others or leave them out.*

And then speaking of adults she says, *to cement ourselves as a group (but I*

suppose children might do this too) to cement ourselves as a group to be a stronger we, we'll deliberately, she says, identify and brand others as "them".

This business of drawing lines between us and them is of course not new. It was unfortunately alive and well in the early days of the Christian church where the struggle was between Christians and Christians: between followers of Jesus who were Jewish, and followers of Jesus who were not Jewish. So some of the Jewish Christians would say in the early days of the church to the Gentile Christians, they would say *"We're here first. We are God's ancient people. We've been God's ancient people for 1500 years. You are welcome into the kingdom but it's really our kingdom and not yours. You can come in but not as first-class citizens, but as second-class citizens."* And this issue almost broke the church apart. In fact the exclusionists almost won. They almost won the day, and would have won, were it not for some Jewish Christians on the inside who said to their fellow Jewish Christians that this exclusionary approach was wrong. They had the courage to do this – and among them the leader was the apostle Paul, who wrote a great deal of what is now our New Testament, and who had the courage to stand up to his own people and to say, *"Jesus came not just for some but for all, not just for his old people but for his new people as well, and all on an equal footing."*

They backed up their case by looking of course first of all to Jesus himself. So you find Jesus as he preaches primarily to his own Jewish people, you find him speaking for example to a Roman centurion – it's hard for us, though I think we do have images in our world today, to understand how hated those Romans were. He said to the Roman centurion in response to his faith that "Not even in Israel have I seen such faith as this" (Lk.7:9) This was a powerful statement, an affirmation that this person was not second-class, barely in, but he was in by faith all the way.

So they pointed to Jesus' teaching. But more than that, they pointed repeatedly as well back to Isaiah, back to the last chapters of Isaiah, back to those portraits painted of a servant whom those Christians identified with Jesus. And as they looked at the portrait of the servant in Isaiah they couldn't escape the fact *that when he came, when he was born, he came, he was born for all.* For all. And there was power in that word all. That power is expressed in our Scripture readings in the word "nations." So listen again to Isaiah Chapter 60 and Verses 1 through 3:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come. And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you, for darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness **the people**; yet the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you. **Nations** shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

So in Matthew's gospel these kings appear, the magi appear, and Isaiah says they will bring gifts (he mentions the frankincense and the gold but not the myrrh) and they are symbols – the magi and their gifts – of the facts that the baby born in the manger came for all. Not just those on the inside but those on the outside as well.

In the 49th Chapter of Isaiah, for example, God speaks to the servant like this he says,
It is too light a thing that you should be my servant only to raise up the tribes

of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel? (that is, only for my ancient people? No! he is the Messiah of God's ancient people, but more!! Much more!!) I will give you as a light to the nations of my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Now this is really important – and it's personally really important – because in a sense those first Jewish Christians were absolutely right: they're the insiders, and we, most of us at least, are gentiles: we're the outsiders. We have no initial right to presume, to make the assumption that the Jewish messiah would come for us.

Most of us here in this room don't spend much time being outsiders; we tend to be insiders in most of what we do: so we make the assumption easily, without a thought. Of course he came for us!! But when it comes to this distinction, we cannot forget that we are the outsiders! We are gentiles and we are on the outside, and the assumption that the Jewish Messiah came for us, well, this is one huge step, that we have probably always taken for granted: but we have no right whatsoever to take it for granted! In Isaiah's words, *we are the nations, we are the people at the ends of the earth.*

We may think the world revolves around us, but it does not; we're the latecomers. But Jesus, the servant, says to us "Don't worry, don't panic, you outsiders, – you're in too! You're not half in. You're in the whole way. When I came, when I was born, I was born for you, and you are in that you." We are in the us. We are there the whole way. We are in, not out! And we know this because Jesus is that servant who came not just for those who were there first, but for those at the ends of the earth, us, who are part of "the nations," the outside-others!

Of course, even though most of us feel as if we are on the inside most of the time, still, all of us know what it's like to be in the outside – and some of us perhaps feel this sense of being left out or excluded very strongly. So, for you especially, you need to listen to this word of enormous good news and believe it: that Jesus says to you, "I was born for you because you're part of the all, I was born in humility for you because you are a part of the you, I was born to heal not just them but you, to give you the life for which you were created." Were it not for Jesus the servant, all of us here today would be on the outside! But with his coming, we have been welcomed in.

This to me, I trust to you, is enormous good news. It's a good reason for singing in Latin. *Gloria In Excelsis Deo*. Glory to God in the highest. This is the best news of all, and it's of enormous comfort. **But it shouldn't just be good news of enormous comfort, it should in fact also be news of enormous challenge.**

You see, in the birth of the baby, what God was doing was expanding the circle of his people, expanding the circle of his kingdom. And if this is what God was doing that first Christmas through Jesus, the servant born for all, shouldn't we be doing the same, like God? Isn't this our calling to be as much like God as we can, as those made in his image? An image defaced by sin, perhaps, but to which we are being called to return? Shouldn't we at the very least be asking ourselves, when it comes to my life: *Who's on the outside of the boundary for me, who should be*

on the inside? Who do I exclude? Whether it's intentional or unintentional it doesn't matter. Who do I not see whom I need to see as a follower of Jesus Christ? For God sees all and invites them in to receive the blessing of Christ. Who's on the outside who needs to be in? Who do I include and who do I exclude?

To be sure there's a time to define boundaries in life and to uphold standards. If you are going to pursue excellence, then sometimes you have to have a tightknit group who are well qualified and in it all together.

- Sometimes when it comes to pursuing security we need to define boundaries and lock doors. At night time we lock our doors, because there are some people who are not invited in.
- Or, I might like to be on the US Olympic team in one event or another, I need to let you know I've always been excluded – and that's ok. I don't meet the right standards. I don't match up. There is a time for that kind of exclusion. Boundaries are important in life.

But the issue here is this: what's our primary direction? Are we moving in the direction of making our circles tighter and tighter or in expanding them as much as they possibly can be expanded? Christmas – the sending of Jesus the messiah to his ancient people as well as to the nations, was surely a huge moment in which God's wide arms were opened wider and wider. What about ours as well?

Some of you may know the little poem written by Edwin Markham, it goes like this: It's called *Outwitted*.

*He drew a circle that shut me out, heretic rebel a thing to flout,
but love and I had the wit to win, we drew a circle that took him.*

That's what God did at Christmas with the baby: expanded the circle so that when he came he didn't just come *for them, but for us*. When he was born, he was born in humility for all of us; when he was born he was born to bring his healing eternally to all of us.

What a huge sigh of relief we should give: we're in.

And what a huge challenge: to expand our circles of belonging as Christ did for us.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2015 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800