

An Exact Imprint

Christmas Day – December 25, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Isaiah 52:7-10 (NRSV)

⁷How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces
peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
⁸Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
⁹Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
¹⁰The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Hebrews 1:1-4 (NRSV)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

It’s Christmas! And Christmas is for everyone. A babe is born. Jesus is our Savior. Alleluia!

An “exact imprint”

If you have a coin in your pocket, you might pull it out for a moment. The coin will help us understand better what the writer of Hebrews is trying to convey when he calls Jesus the “exact imprint of God’s very being.”

The Greek word translated “exact imprint” is *charaktér*, from which we get our word “character.” It is a word that was born in the world of engraving, particularly in the production of coins. In Jesus’ day, the emperor would employ an engraver to carve the emperor’s portrait and a few words (such as “son of god”!) on a hard metal die or stamp. The engraver might carve a depiction of some notable event on another die. Then, the coin would be minted by

The Ruins of Jerusalem

Today’s passage from Isaiah will be much more meaningful to us if we put in some context.

Isaiah was a prophet who brought God’s word to the southern kingdom of Judah more than 700 years before Jesus. Perhaps no other writing prophet has influenced Judaism and Christianity more than Isaiah. However, it is very likely that Isaiah did not write the entire book that you and I know as the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah consists of two portions. So-called “First Isaiah,” chapters 1-39, was written by the prophet Isaiah more than 700 years before Jesus, when the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun and destroyed by the Assyrians. Isaiah warns the people of Judah that the same ruin will befall them unless they turn back to God. Judah’s fall is not immediate. Nonetheless, Jerusalem burned to the ground about 150 years later.

There are passages of hope in “first Isaiah” as well. Some of Isaiah’s messages look ahead to a time when all of God’s people would be restored under God’s rule. The prophet looked ahead to the coming of God’s kingdom, when all things would be put right.

So-called “Second Isaiah,” chapters 40-66, was written during the time of the exile, after the Babylonians overran the kingdom and burned Jerusalem and the temple in 587BC. It is hard to overstate the darkness of the exile. In the midst of the Jews’ crushing pain and despair, another prophet, writing in the name of the great prophet Isaiah, brought the Jews comforting promises of a time when God would raise up a Savior who would usher in God’s rule.

Thus, the reference to the “ruins of Jerusalem” in verse 9 is concrete. The Jews looked forward to the day when God would come to their rescue, when he would “bare his holy arm.” On that day, God would roll up his sleeves and get to work. All the world would see that God is God. Can we even imagine a bigger day!

Thus, the prophet uses an image of lookouts posted on mountains. The lookouts are to signal the instant that God appears on the horizon. God is riding to rescue not only his people, but all the world. “The ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” The fact that passages from Isaiah such as this one were written during the exile makes them immeasurably more real and meaningful to me.

It is an expression of God’s love that the most hopeful images of God’s kingdom were written during Israel’s deepest darkness.

placing a blank between the two dies and striking them with a large hammer. The resulting coin would be an exact impression of the original dies. The coin would be the perfect expression of the original. We can see how the word *charaktér* came to mean not only letters in the alphabet but also a person's essential qualities.

So, what is the writer of Hebrews saying to us about Jesus? N.T. Wright puts it this way:

“It is as though the exact imprint of the father’s very nature and glory has been precisely reproduced in the soft metal of the son’s human nature. Now it is there for all the world to see. . . . Stay with the image of the emperor and his engraver a moment longer, and think about the opening two verses of this remarkable letter. Supposing the emperor had been wanting for a long time to tell his subjects who he was, to give them an idea of his character. And supposing the metal stamp, or die, hadn’t been invented yet. The emperor would only be able to send out drawings or sketches, which might tell the people something but wouldn’t give them the full picture. Then, at last, the reality: hard metal on soft, original picture exactly reproduced. Yes, says the writer: God had for a long time been sending advance sketches of himself to his people, but now he’s given us his exact portrait.”¹

In plain sight

When the lookouts on the mountain announce God’s arrival (see the page one text box), it is Good News for everyone. Christmas is Good News for everyone. Despite many people’s denials, there is one true God and that baby in the manger, the Christ-child, is the perfect expression of that one true God. Indeed, that baby is more than a mere imprint, no matter how exact. The baby is God himself, not all of God, but fully and completely God.

We struggle to find words that can make any sense of this. Of course we do. The writer of Hebrews struggles. Paul struggles. We are trying to describe, to talk about, the infinite and holy God. But regardless of what words we choose to express this glorious mystery,² we do know what it means. It means that God brought human history to a climax in the birth, life, and death of Jesus. The world could never be the same. And it never has been the same. To paraphrase Isaiah, the Lord has returned in plain sight.

A public event

There is a lot of pressure these days to make Christmas a private celebration, as if it matters only for Christians. But Christmas is a public event, the most public event ever. When John sees Jesus coming to the Jordan River, he exclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That is as public as it comes. It is through Jesus that the world is reconciled to God whether the world knows it or not.

Much of the world doesn’t know it, so we have a story we must tell. A public story. Everyone’s story. A story about a God, the one true God, who took upon himself our own messy humanity so that we might live in a right and a loving relationship with him. Every Christmas we celebrate this story. Like the angels to the shepherds we want to proclaim to people everywhere that Jesus is Lord. That our God, their Creator, has given us a gift we could never measure. Sometimes in our desire to tell this story, we forget Peter’s teaching: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). It is the gentle and respectful part that can be so hard for us.

When I was a boy, all this was pretty easy. Maybe too easy. Too easy to take for granted. Everyone I knew was a Christian, or at least that is how they would have described themselves. I think there might have been one Jewish boy in Cub Scouts. But just a few decades later, I live side-by-side with people of other religions, nationalities, and races. Learning to live in a pluralistic world has not been easy for many of us. Must we rename a Christmas tree a Holiday tree? Must we withdraw Christmas from the public arena entirely? The challenge to Christians in our society is to learn how to be gentle and respectful with those who deny that Jesus is Lord, yet never surrender our claim that he is just that. How are we to be the light to the world? How are we to invite others into God’s family? How are we to live out Christmas?

¹from N.T. Wright’s “. . . for everyone” commentary on Hebrews.

²I’m sure that as Paul and other early Christians tried to write a theology of God, they came to appreciate why God chose to reveal himself in his actions, in stories and parables. Narrative retains the mystery in a way that descriptive logical language never could.

Daily Bible Readings

(As we prepare to read through the Bible in 2006, here are five of my favorite passages.)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Micah 4:1-8, 6:6-8 What does God expect of us in his kingdom?</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 53 The suffering servant – a summary of Jesus’ vocation written centuries before his birth.</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 15 The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 15 Paul’s glorious chapter on the resurrection.</p>
<p>Day 5 Revelation 5 In the throne room of God, no one is worthy to open the scroll. John is told it will be the Lion of Judah who is worthy, but turns and sees only a lamb.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

December Book Recommendation

Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)

St. Andrew will be reading and preaching *Thru the Bible* next year. Many of us will be using the new *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)* put together by Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, and others. The Renovaré team has tried to combine the best of a study Bible and a devotional Bible in a single volume. The introductory materials and the book introductions are particularly helpful.

We have gotten copies of this Bible at a much reduced price. Copies are available at the bookstore.

Winter Bible Academy Starts January 9! Class information and registration is on-line at www.standrewccl.org and www.standrewumc.org

Classes include *The Practice of Meditation* (Tuesday evenings with Rev. Kathryn Self), *Introducing the Old Testament* (Monday evenings with Scott Engle), *Confronting the Controversies* (Thursday lunch with Rev. Dough Meyer), *The God Who Saves: Exodus and New Exodus* (available at two times: Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings, with Scott Engle), and *1 Corinthians: By the Grace of God* (Thursday mornings with Frankey Commer)

This would be a great time to take a Bible Academy class. Please join us!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Isaiah uses the image of the Lord baring his arm for all the world to see. Though Isaiah surely means this as an image of power, in a Christmas sermon N.T. Wright sees something more in the bare arm:

“But see the arm of the Lord stretched out, bare and helpless, in the manger; listen to the word made flesh, gaze upon the incarnate glory, fill your mind with wisdom in person ~ and suddenly the language of adoration makes a whole lot of sense. . . . And our innate desire to see the world put to rights kindles again to a passion when we realize that:

‘This little Babe so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan’s fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak, unarmed wise,
The gates of hell he will surprise.’ [from Robert Southwell’s poem, “New Heaven, New War”]

He reaches out his naked arms towards the world with love and power; and shall we not adore him? Shall we not join in his work in the world? Shall we not in turn find ourselves caught up, as we receive him and believe in his name, in ourselves becoming children of God, charged with the same mission of peace and mercy and reconciliation? Shall we not greet him this day as we meet him, and bless as we understand, on this Christ’s Mass of all days? Shall we not give him glory? Shall we not come and adore him? ‘The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.’”