

-Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

2035 S. Penrod Lane, Pinetop, AZ 85935

Ph/Fax (928) 367-1183 Email: shepherdpt @frontiernet.net

www.shepherdofthemountains.com

Pastor: R. Wayne Morton

The Eve of the Nativity of our Lord

December 24, 2017

“I’m Just Sayin’ . . . Nothing Less Than God Would Do”

Text: Isaiah 7:14b

“. . . Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).

A guy is delicately fingering what he is sure had to be a very expensive diamond ring. His co-worker is showing it to him, and explaining that he bought the piece for his wife for Christmas.

“But I thought you told me she wanted one of those 4WD’s” he shot back, confused.

“Oh, she did!” came the reply. “But where in the world was I going to get her a fake *Jeep*?”

/ Okay, so what about this “*Immanuel*” Isaiah told us about? Has anyone checked *His* papers?

The truth is, He’s all over the “papers,” isn’t He? All over the “parchments.” All over the papyri. All over the scrolls.

All over *Isaiah*, for sure. You heard it earlier in our sixth lesson (9:2): “*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. . . .*”

Now, Isaiah isn’t talking about “dark” as in White Mountains-of-Arizona, no-light-pollution, no-moon, can’t-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face, stumble-around-in-the *dark*. He’s isn’t talking about *physical* darkness. He’s talking about *spiritual* darkness. He’s talking about people - well, you know how it is in the dark - their eyes adjusted *a little*, being able to see enough to get around but not being able to see *clearly*. Not being able to see *anything in focus* - and in particular, the reality of their *sin*. He’s talking about people stumbling around in that darkness, and in that sin. He’s talking how *Israel* - after the Lord had brought them safely out of slavery in Egypt, after He had brought them safely into the Promised Land - forgot about Him, turned away from Him, and began chasing after the false gods of the Canaanites. He’s talking about how they made idols for themselves, and worshiped Baal, and began to do all kinds of evil things. He’s talking about how they secretly hoped that that murky, shadowy “darkness” would hide . . . their pride, their greed, their deception, their betrayal, their adultery, and their idolatry.

Yes, that’s Isaiah talking about “darkness,” and, frankly, we shouldn’t be *surprised*; for Isaiah was talking about that earlier, when he was talking about *himself*: “*I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips*” (6:5)?

Now I don’t mind telling you I’m “in the dark” when it comes to art. *Art*. Take *this* piece, for example. No less than the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth - a man some call the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century - calls it the greatest Christian painting of all time! Now, not to try to draw that tiny Alpine nation (Switzerland) - long known for its “neutrality,” with a long tradition of not taking *sides* - into any kind of a conflict, let alone an all-out war, but *you and I* might well want to call it a *fake*!

It’s the Isenheim Altarpiece.

Isenheim, because it was created to serve as the center of attention in an Isenheim, *Germany* hospital that was built by the Brothers of St. Anthony, an order that devoted itself to the care of Germany's sick and dying. And *Altarpiece*, because, while, as I said, I was home sick the day they covered ancient art in *school*, it's like one of those *trptychs*, one of those sets of three carved panels that are hinged together on the sides so they can either be folded shut or displayed open. Nicolas of Hagenau did the carving. Matthias Grünewald did the painting.

It's the large center panel that Dr. Barth is so taken with. It's Jesus on the cross. Okay, so now *you* know the picture. There's Jesus, of course, with Mary on *one* side and John *on the other* - you know, from the third, traditionally, of those "Seven Last Words" of Jesus from the cross: "*Woman, behold, your son!*" and, to "*the disciple whom he loved,*" "*Behold, your mother!*" (John 19:26).

Only it's not "*the disciple whom he loved*"! Oh, it's *John*, all right, but it's not *Saint* John! It's John the *Baptist*!

Yes it's John the Baptist, all right. You can't *miss* him in that tacky "*camel's hair coat*" of his, and that "*doesn't-even-go-with-the-outfit*" "*leather belt around his waist.*" You can almost see the "*wild honey*" dripping down his chin, and imagine part of a "*wild locust*" still stuck in his teeth (Mt. 3:4).

Oh, it's John the Baptist, and if his "getup" isn't *gauche enough*, he's doing what your mother told you never to do to someone because it's not polite. He's *pointing*! He's pointing a long bony finger. He's pointing at Jesus.

He's also saying something, but while we can't read the words on the scroll or book that's in his hand, Grünewald has helpfully painted the words for us in the background. You just have to be able to read *Latin*. "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (Jn. 3:30).

But now the problem is - the reason I say we might want to call this whole thing a *fake* - is that John the Baptist.

wasn't *there* at Jesus' death. John was long since dead by then. He had lost his head. And yet, here he is - in what the great Dr. Barth insists might be the greatest Christian painting of all time - pointing at a clearly *crucified* Jesus.

So, as I say, not wanting to pick a fight with the Swiss - and on Christmas Eve, no less - but maybe you and I, let's just say, have some big questions about all this.

Well, bring 'em on! For this is just the place where people bring big questions. And on a big day in the church year - and in our world there might not be any day bigger than *this* one - they bring the biggest of them all.

"What's the point of it all? Is this all there is? Is death the last word? Why can't I ever keep the promises I make? Why am I always so unhappy? If Jesus is the Savior of the world, why doesn't the world look a whole lot more saved?"

Yes, it's Christmas, . . . and we're in church, . . . and we've got questions, . . . and we want answers!

But of course church isn't the *only* place that *has* them. *Answers*, I mean. Check the Internet. Search "the web." Turn on the television. Tune in to "Talk Radio." Buy a tape. Download a book. Go to a cocktail party. Invite some of the neighbors over. There are all *kinds* of answers out there, from all kinds of people, all promising that they have the answers to all your questions. There's nothing any simpler today than finding "Six simple steps to *whatever*." And I guarantee you success if you just Google "The secret to a successful" - again - "*whatever*."

Hey, even other *religions* promise answers to all your big questions. Muslims, for instance, teach that Allah - through his prophet Mohammed - cared enough about us and our questions to leave us a book - an *answer* book, if you will, a book that contains the truth - the *Qu'ran* (*Koran*).

Now not to try to start a war with what, almost the entire Middle East, along with big chunks of Asia and Africa

- especially not on Christmas Eve - but let's just say, "I'm just sayin' . . ."

I'm just sayin' . . . that down through the ages we've had a *lot* of good words from *God*. We had the *Ten Commandments*. We had all the words of the Prophets. We had the beautiful words of the Psalmists. And yet, after all those years and all those words, if Isaiah were living today, he could say the very same thing as he did twenty-seven centuries ago - all that "*people walking in darkness . . . dwelling in a land of deep darkness*" stuff. *That*, and that, "*I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips*" (6:5).

I'm just sayin' . . . that we needed - that we still *need* - more than just more *words* - even words about *God*. We need *God Himself!* In the *flesh!*

I'm just sayin' . . . that not a single one of the - there must be hundreds, maybe even thousands - *fakes* out there would be any use to us at all. A fake just would not do. Nothing less than *God* would do.

I'm just sayin' . . . what John said - *St. John*. We need that Word of God, but we need it right here *in the flesh!*

And that's exactly what we got that first Christmas, as John, who witnessed firsthand the glory of the God-man, testifies:

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

"The Word - the second person of the Holy Trinity from all eternity - did not cease to be what it was before; but it became what it was not before - *flesh*" (So, R. C. H. Lenski, *The Gospel of John*, p. 71)

I'm just sayin' . . . what Isaiah said: "We got *Immanuel*, "God with us."

Why "*Immanuel*"? Simply because nothing less than *God* would do.

I'm just sayin' . . . that in a world of fuzzy "*spiritual*,"

God got "flesh-and-blood *physical*. In a world of random *impersonal*, *God* got *personal*. That when we encounter *Christ*, we encounter not an idea, not a concept, not some notion, not a word, not a whole *book* of words, but instead a *person*. At the very first, a baby. Born of a virgin. In a manger. In Bethlehem. In Judea. When Quirinius was governor of Syria.

I'm just sayin' . . . that Jesus did not say, "I have come to author a great book," or "I have come to tell you some truth," but rather, "I [emphasis added] *am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*." Or as we sing, "*O come let us adore*" - not what He *said*, but rather Jesus Himself - "*Him, Christ the Lord*."

I'm just sayin' . . . what John *the Baptist* said, too: "*The kingdom of heaven is at hand*." *Close* at hand. As close as this Jesus of Nazareth, whom John pointed out to the crowds with that bony finger of his the first time he laid eyes on Him, announcing: "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29).

I'm pretty sure *that* has to be why the great Dr. Karl Barth likes the Isenheim Altarpiece so much. It shows John doing what *all* preachers should do - hey, what all *believers* should do - pointing to Jesus. "*Immanuel*." "*God with us*."

You heard his name. But that's not his *only* name. So, remember what we said about all those big questions? Stay tuned for the answers! For just a couple of chapters after that "*Immanuel*" verse, Isaiah the prophet has *this* to say about this "*God with us*":

"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 . . ." (Is. 9:6-7a).

Wonderful Counselor? Well now, a *counselor* is "just what the doctor ordered," isn't it, for we all know you don't

go to a counselor unless there's something *wrong*. And with all our questions, we've already admitted there's a lot wrong with us: "Why can't I ever keep the promises I make?"

Why am I always so unhappy?

So, as counselors go, is this one going to be any *good*? His *name* says he's going to be a *wonder* of a Counselor! He's going to be the best there *is*! He'll be able to help you with *any* problem, *any* *question*.

Now a big part of being a Counselor - and especially a *wonderful* one - is having a plan. And this *Immanuel* is going to *have* one - a *wonder* of a plan. And we know all *about* it - first from the prophets, then from John the Baptist, then from His own mouth. It's a plan to bring light into every last corner of this dark world.

Oh, but plans are *fine*, you say. The *real* question is, does he have what it takes to carry it *out*?

Well, the good news *is*, the answer's right there in his name: *Mighty God*?

This "*child*" "*born to us*," this "*son*" "*given to us*," has nothing less than the unlimited power of God at his command! "Is there anybody who can fix what's wrong with me? Is there any way to make the pain go away?" Take heart! What *Immanuel* plans, He has the power to carry out. What *He promises*, He has the power to bring about. You can *count* on it!

Everlasting Father.

"Is this all there is? Is death the last word?" *Everlasting* tells you that's not going to be the *case*! There's *more*. There's an *endless* more - a life that knows no end.

But even more important is the "*Father*" part. This "*Immanuel*" - "*God with us*" - is going to be our "forever *Father*." What's going to be behind all his "counseling" of us, what's going to be a part of his every plan for us, is the deep, loving concern that a father has for his children.

And the upshot of it all? His name is "*Prince of*

Peace." That plan of His to bring light into every last corner of this dark world? It's His plan to save the world. It's His plan to make peace between us sinners and a holy God. It's His plan to root out and carry off all our sin. And after that, it's His plan to bring peace into our daily struggle against the flesh, his plan to bring peace into every battle that we have to fight.

So as for that big "If Jesus is the Savior of the world, why doesn't the world look a whole lot more saved?" question, this is peace *within*, not peace *without*. And yet, if enough people received His peace, we certainly could see this world look a whole lot more saved, we certainly could see, that is, . . . peace *like a river*, flowing through our streets, our towns, our world.

Okay so that's all well and good, you say, but we've all learned that *in this world* nothing good lasts *forever*. All our "toys" eventually wear out, given enough time our relationships all end, even the best people we *know always die*.

But we're not talking about just *this* world. Like we just said, we're talking about the world to come, too - the one that will be everlasting. That's why, after sharing those other names of "*Immanuel*" - "*God with us*" - with us, Isaiah reassures us: "*Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.*"

Now this is not the familiar Democratic ideal of big government; Isaiah was much too early for that kind of idea. This is the assurance that "*Immanuel's*" "*government*" - his *kingdom*, to use that word John used - will win out, will be victorious, will have success in the end. *Lasting* success. *Everlasting* success.

Why "*Immanuel*"? Why "*God with us*"? Because nothing less than God would do. "*The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee*" - O Little Town of Bethlehem - "*tonight*."

I'm just sayin'. Merry Christmas. Amen.