

Advent 2 (2020)

The year was 1939. The place, rural Mississippi.

Heavy rain had been falling all day. Now, it was night.

Unbeknownst to those travelling on the main route connecting Atlanta and Dallas, west of Jackson, the middle portion of a concrete bridge had washed out.

Vehicles began plunging into the churning, muddy water below.

A black man by the name of “Sugar Man” Daniel stood in the road waving his hands pleading with people to stop before it was too late. Not all heeded his warning. Some died.

We find something similar going on in this morning’s Old Testament reading. Like Sugar Man Daniel, we find the prophet Isaiah pleading with the people of his day.

Instead of waving his arms, he gives them a song with an encoded message. The song is about a grape vineyard.

The owner of this vineyard was very partial to it. He had high expectation for it and did everything within his power to ensure that it produced bountifully.

But, when harvest came, to his great sorrow and disappointment, it brought forth worthless grapes, fruit that on the surface looked like proper grapes but which were noxious and stinking and no good.

As the song continues, in the end, he cries out: **“What more could I have done for my vineyard?”**

The answer is nothing.

What is the message of Isaiah’s song?

Well, he leaves neither his first hearers nor us to wonder. It comes across loud and clear in verse 7.

The owner is God. The vineyard is the people of Judah. The message:
Danger ahead! Bridge out!

For Isaiah's hearers that meant:

“You are on a road leading to destruction. Your disregard of God's laws, your half-hearted worship, your failure to look after the needy, your excessive focus on pleasure is going to catch up with you.”

Might not that be God's message to us in this nation today?

In particular, Isaiah told the people of his day that if they did not turn back from their waywardness their country was going to be overrun by foreign invaders and they themselves were going to be carried into captivity.

My announced sermon series in Advent is “The Gospel in Isaiah.”

Okay, you might well be asking: where is the Gospel – the good news – in this passage?

Is there any good news here?

On the surface there appears to be none. But take a closer look at Isaiah's song, and you will find it. Here we get nothing less than a glimpse into the heart of God.

Here we discover a God who is totally committed to His vineyard . . . that is, to His Covenant people. He so loves them that there is nothing He will not do for them.

Is not that the same message that we find in the New Testament? Think about John 3:16 which has been called the ‘Gospel in a nutshell’:

“For God so loved the world, /// that he gave his only begotten Son . . .”

What more could God have done for us and for our rescue?

Maybe you grew up in a tradition where God was seen as a stern ogre, a God with a flyswatter in His hand waiting to pounce. Well, here is your antidote to such a perception.

Maybe at the moment you feel all alone. Covid has done a number on you.

You may even be having a pity party. Here's good news. You are not alone. Somebody loves you. Someone has given His all for you.

I was once at a home where a family member had died following a long illness. Before allowing the undertaker to remove their loved one, the family affixed to his lapel a button reading "I am loved."

Look to the cross, and you will find the same message. Indeed, God affixes just such a button on each one of us when we are baptised -- "I am loved." That is good news.

Maybe you take this for granted. You went to Sunday School where you sang, "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so."

But many in our world today, especially the younger generation, did not have this experience. As a result, when the bright lights go down, when relationships don't work out, when drugs no longer work, when a job goes away. . . they feel empty, abandoned, all alone, unloved.

At such moments, you as a Christian and Churchman have a great missional tool in your belt. What is it? It is the message on that little button: Someone loves you.

It may sound simplistic, but these are just the words people in the state I have just described need to hear.

We who grew up in Christian homes and in communities where Christian knowledge was well-nigh universal may have a hard time getting our head round where a great many folks are in today's culture.

Telling them to come *back* to Christ does nothing. They have not been there in the first place.

I was talking to a young man this past week. He is polite, clean cut, goal oriented and possesses great potential . . . but is, at the very least, ambivalent toward God and the Church.

Why? Because Christ has let Him down? Why? Because he went to church and found nothing there he wanted?

No, in his case it is because the whole concept of God and salvation is totally foreign to him.

He grew up in a home where no one went to church, no one prayed, no one spoke of God. More than that, a home from which he now feels excluded, because his father has remarried and has a new family. How do we reach out to someone like that?

Ultimately, it is God's job, but God uses people, people like you and me to accomplish His purposes in the world.

In the case of this young man, I told one of his friends, someone to whom he really looks up.

“You may be the only Bible this young man reads . . . the only Christ he sees . . . the only Gospel he hears. Be a witness. Use words when necessary, but begin with being an example.”

The God found in Isaiah's song loves and pleads and – if we read between the lines – even weeps for His beloved.

Jesus does the same thing in the New Testament. As He approaches Jerusalem for the last time and sees the city from afar, he cries out:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, /// and ye would not!”

The God we encounter in Jesus does not want people to run off the bridge and perish. He wants all to come to repentance – do an about turn – and live.

Judgment is not God's first-order will. But judgment is a reality and people need to face it and be warned.

But, as I prepare to close, I want to suggest that even God's judgment is 'good news'.

‘Judgment’ is not *just* deciding against something. It also involves deciding in favour of something.

In the case of God, He decides against all that dwarfs and ultimately destroys His human’s creatures and in favour of all that ennoble human life. **“I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly,”** says Jesus in John’s Gospel.

In the case of Judah to whom Isaiah is speaking, they do go into captivity in Babylon around 586 B.C. God’s judgment comes.

But God’s purpose – His ultimate purpose – is not their destruction, but to get rid of the garbage in their souls.

What followed from their captivity was that a small number returned to their own land 70 years later, thus setting the stage for the coming of Jesus, who is the ultimate Gospel, the ultimate Good News.

For God so love that He gave . . . that *whosoever* believes . . . may have everlasting life.

In view here is not *just* God’s Covenant people as in Isaiah’s song, but everyone. You, me, my unbelieving neighbour, the man or woman in a foreign land who has never heard the Gospel . . . everyone. Jesus draws the circle wider.

The bridge is out for everyone. Everyone needs the Lord. Therefore, Resolve:

To be that Bible many have not read; that Christ many have not seen; that Gospel all so desperately need. /// Be a witness, and begin today.