

## Isaiah 52

Grace Mercy and Peace are now yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ, Amen!

There is something about the Christmas season that brings all of us back to our childhood. Between the gifts, the decorations, the wonder, it is easy to slip back into what it was like to be a kid at Christmas. This time of year, stirs memories of years past and the traditions that made our celebration of our Lord's birth unique and special for our families. I remember growing up that we would try and watch one or two Christmas specials as family around this time of year. It helped us get into the Christmas Spirit. I remember my mom wrapping gifts to a Christmas special or decorating the house with it on in the background. Sometimes it was a comedy, other times an animated special.

No matter what we watched, each and every special was concerned with one central question. A question that structured the story of each Christmas special that we watched. All of these shows asked the same basic question: What is the meaning of Christmas. What does this time of year mean for us as we celebrate together? Some shows reminded us that nothing was more important than family. We would watch the story of a family torn apart by hardship, loss or interpersonal issues come together for Christmas dinner and enjoy a meal together again like they used to. For them Christmas was about spending time with your family. Other shows would remind us that it was better to give than to receive. A stingy character would go through some life transformation and better connect with the less fortunate to provide them with a great Christmas. Giving to others encapsulated to holiday season. Other shows take it a completely different direction and make Christmas a time of reflection. To remember the past year, the ups and downs and to look forward to the coming new year. It takes on the theme of a colder thanksgiving.

As Christians we have done something a little different than the rest of the world today. Instead of sitting around our house in our pajamas watching Christmas movies, opening and playing with our presents or spending time with family, we have gathered here this morning in the house of the Lord to come and worship this newborn Jesus. Yet if the meaning of Christmas is anything like what these Christmas specials say it is, why are we gathered here today this cold morning? If Christmas is all about family, church seems like a strange place to celebrate it. Wouldn't it be better spent talking and spending time with one another? If Christmas is all about giving to others, sitting here this morning seems like a strange place to start. There is a world of needy people just outside these walls. If Christmas is a time of reflection on the last year, that seems much better spent sitting in some comfortable clothes and a large cup of coffee instead of here this morning. Was Jesus born in a manger to help us celebrate family? Did God come to us in the flesh in order to help us realize that it is better to give than to receive? Does Jesus birth help us reflect on our last year and all that place in it?

These are all well and good things that we should celebrate, but if that is what Christmas is all about, church seems like the last place we should be spending our Christmas together.

Our Old Testament text for today helps us understand what we are doing here this morning. The prophet Isaiah is writing words of hope and encouragement for a people who are waiting and feeling lost in captivity in the ancient city of Babylon. Many years earlier the people of God in Judah had fallen away from God. Instead of worshipping Yahweh alone, they began to follow the other gods of their neighbors. They also forgot the ways in which God had called them to live. They hated the poor and the widows, injustice and evil were throughout their cities and corruption was around every office.

The people of God had fallen far from their calling as God's covenantal people. Their sins piled before the Lord and after being called to repent and turn back to the Lord their God, God sent judgement on little Judah.

The Babylonians, the superpower of the day. Swept like a raging flood across all of Judah. Destroying land, people, resources and everything that stood in their way. The Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem and tore down the walls of David's city. They also tore down the place where God dwelled with His people, the temple. In the wake of the destruction, the people who were still alive were either killed or exiled to the city of Babylon. Taken from their home and all that they knew, the remnant of the people of God were strangers in a strange land. Captives in a land not their own, surrounded by different languages, customs and religions.

Psalms 137 offers some insight of what it was like to be in exile. The Psalmist writes: By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! Isaiah writes to captives, captives who are desperately looking for where God is and when He is going to save His people.

We too are held captive and are in need of being rescued by our God. We haven't been conquered and dragged to a foreign country against our will, but we certainly are being held in captivity to our sin. From our first parents, Adam and Eve, to here today we are held captive by the sin that has destroyed this perfect creation of our God. We look around the world today at all the evil we experience and wonder where is our God? We see death and violence around our nation and world. Senseless acts of violence that take life at random. Economic hardship that makes just taking care of a family and holding down a job a difficult endeavor. We see the evil of disease that destroys, and ruins lives without any sense or logic behind it. Young and old get sick and suffer from the broken nature of this creation.

We even experience the brokenness of this world personally. We hurt as those around us are hurtful and spiteful. We experience the breaking down of our bodies and the dangerous of economic hardship. We even participate in the evil of the world, when by our thoughts words or deeds fail to do anything less than perfectly love others and love God. Our words were sharp and hurt others, our deeds brought about difficulty for another person, we dishonor ourselves before God and one another. Sin has weaved itself in us and through us. We are thoroughly caught, trapped and taken captive by sin and we are unable to free ourselves. Isaiah writes to us captives, captives who are desperately looking for where God is and when He is going to save His people from this captivity?

God's response through the prophet Isaiah doesn't seem to match the reality that the people of God in exile in Babylon and in sin experience. Isaiah writes to us: "Your God Reigns". As God's people in both Babylon and caught in sin, God's words seem to contradict reality. God doesn't seem in control, His people are held in captivity, His reign seems far and distant from his people.

Yet God brings good news to those who are in captivity. The Lord will bare His arm and all the nations of the world will see the salvation of our God. Despite what we see, our God Reigns, he is in control and will not leave His people in captivity. Our God sends a king to lead His people out of captivity. For God's people in Babylon, God sends a king to free His people – the Persian King Cyrus the Great conquers Babylon and sets the

people of God free. Their captivity ends and they are sent back to Zion. God reigns and he cares for His people. He bares His arm before the nations and frees the captives.

For His people caught in captivity of their sin, God gives good news. Our God Reigns and He is sending a king to lead His people out of their captivity. God bares His holy arm against the nations, but this time instead of sending someone in His place comes himself. Jesus, king of kings and Lord of Lords takes on flesh and dwells amongst us captives. Christ is born, lives a life free of captivity to sin, He then takes on the sin of the world in His death. He takes from us the sin and death that was the end of our captivity and puts it upon himself. He dies and in His death our captivity ends. In His rising we are given a new hope, new life as Children of God. The Good News starts in the manger and finishes with the cross of Christ and the empty tomb. Our God Reigns, our King born this day sets the captives free to life eternal in our Lords kingdom. Were there will be no more tears, no more sadness and our captivity to sin will end.

As we return to the question of what the meaning of Christmas is, as we go back and watch those Christmas specials today, we can certainly celebrate about our families, giving to others and take some time to reflect on the past year. Yet as Christians we know that the meaning of Christmas is much more than that. The meaning of Christmas is Good News, Our God Reigns and He has come to set us captives Free. In Jesus name, Amen.