

## **For Unto Us A Child Is Born**

By Kate Satterstrom

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First Presbyterian Church

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### **Isaiah 9:2-7**

*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied exultation;  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For the yoke of their burden  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders,  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Great will be his authority,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

On Christmas Day 1531, theologian and pastor, Martin Luther, preached from the Christmas story at his morning service and from Isaiah 9 at his afternoon service. He began the afternoon sermon by quickly recalling that the congregation had heard the Christmas story earlier in the day. He told them that they would not hear it again; rather, they would learn how to make use

of it. So, if you'll allow me the liberty, we shared the Christmas story last night—in the spirit of Martin Luther—I would love to take some time to explore the significance of the Christmas story and how we might make use of it.

While we traditionally use the gospels to tell the Christmas narrative, it is also typical to read from the Old Testament book of Isaiah in the Christmas season as well. Isaiah was a prophet who spoke to God's people and political leaders in Jerusalem around the year 700BCE. God's people were living in despair. The Assyrians had conquered them, and they were now in exile. They were living in a land of great darkness. They knew darkness intimately. When Isaiah talks about "the yoke of their burdens", "the bar across their shoulders", and "the rod of their oppressor", these were real, tangible, relatable images that the original hearers of Isaiah's words could relate to. Isaiah stepped into their reality of despair and spoke a message of hope when there was no hope to be found. Isaiah reignited a light in the midst of unimaginable darkness.

When God called on Isaiah, Isaiah responded with a "YES" to being a voice for God. Isaiah is talking directly into the pain of suffering, injustice, and division. He is standing in the grief saying, I see your hurt, I bear witness to your misery, the inequality is real, I long with you for something different, I acknowledge that there is a wide chasm between the world we live in and the world as God desired for it to be. And therefore, we focus our eyes on the one hope that is there: God. When there seems to be no way, there is God. When we're exhausted with nothing left to give, we fix our eyes on God. God is the one who makes a way where there seems to be no way. God is the only one who can provide peace, wisdom, strength, longevity. We can't—and never could—do it on our own.

7 centuries later and 10 miles south of where Isaiah prophesied, we find a young, teenage, unwed mother giving birth in an outbuilding intended for animals. In the narrative of the Christmas story, it is Mary who I am often drawn to. She is a teenager and female; both denote her lack of agency, and her vulnerability should she veer off the societal norms. She embodied both strength and a demure modesty, she has a divine air about her while also standing as a cautionary tale of everything a young women should avoid being. And yet when an angel appears to her (shocking in and of itself) with news unique to her, she responds "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Well acquainted with the words of the prophet Isaiah, Mary knew of the promised kingdom of God. She knew the legend of a ruler whose authority would be unlike any previously known. Mary lived in a state of anticipation, ready for God to act, looking for God's movement in the midst of the everyday ordinary. And while I am sure she received the shock of her lifetime, when word came that *SHE* would give birth to this new ruler that Isaiah promised, she was ready to say "yes"! She trusted God with literally all of who she was.

As Mary carved a new path for what it means to be the mother of God—theotokos: "bearer of God"—Mary cries out praising God through a song we now know as the Magnificat. She says:  
"My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for God has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.  
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is God's name;"

Mary is not called by God to a path that is easy. She is offering herself up to physically bear God. When God showed up and called on Mary, she said yes. She became a unique messenger for God. Like Isaiah the path she was called to was not easy; she wasn't bringing the expected news. But she was willing. As Isaiah pointed to the light of God, Mary bears the light of the world, the source all light is derived from. The light of light. A light that shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

The message of Christmas is the story of God's divine "YES" to humanity. The Old Testament is a repetitive story of God making covenants with God's people, and God's people constantly breaking their promise. God provides the ultimate covenant, the ultimate promise, the ultimate "YES" to God's people by taking on flesh through the birth of Jesus. God shows up and does not leave. God works to bring about God's kingdom. And key to all of this, is that God invites us to be part of this story. God works alongside humans to bring about God's kingdom. God uses the voice of Isaiah calling out in the wilderness. God uses the willingness of Mary to bring about God's kingdom. And in the Christmas story God invites us to be co-authors with God in bringing about God's kingdom. The Christmas story is more than an unconventional birth thousands of years ago. The Christmas story is now. It is the story of God meeting us where we are and inviting us to be part of the kingdom of God.

When we gather here on Sunday mornings, we explore ways we can partner with God to further bring about God's kingdom. We live out the Christmas story of God showing up and us saying "yes" to God's invitation. When small groups gather to study scripture and be in community with one another, we are living into the Christmas story. When the youth gather on Sunday evening and practice a radical hospitality of inclusion, we are living into the Christmas story. When meals are served on Saturday evening and Wednesday morning, we are living into the Christmas story. When Monday Morning Maintenance works to care for this building that has been entrusted to us, we are living out the Christmas story. When we partner with the Greater Yamhill Watershed Council to remove invasive plant species from the Cozine Creek, we are living into the Christmas story. The Christmas story invites us into God's earthly indwelling to partner with God. Does God need us? No. But in God's infinite love, God invites us to be part of bridging the gap between our world as we know it and the world as God intended it to be.

Brene Brown is a clinical social worker, a professor at the University of Texas, an author, podcaster, and lecturer. She is well known for her research on shame, vulnerability, and leadership. She has a devoted fanbase, myself included. When asked why she thinks she has such a strong following Brene said: "I think the reason my work resonates so much is because it's not the work itself that people are drawn to. People are actually drawn to watching me struggle with the work. I'm like, here's what the research says—It's messed up and I don't want

to do it either—but here’s how I’m trying and failing and trying and failing. That’s what people want to watch. If I am here, unwilling to take on hard topics because I can’t do them perfectly, that would bankrupt the entire premises of my work.” Brene is a devout Episcopalian has not shyed away from how her work and her faith are intertwined. Brene is a great reminder of what it looks like to partner with God. We get into the weeds, and we try and fail and try and fail. And God meets us in our trying.

A few years back in 2020 a few of us in church began a book club focused on social justice. We intentionally read books written by marginalized people. People who do not always look like us; many of whom have had different lived experiences than us. When we meet monthly to discuss the latest book we’ve read, we answer two questions: What stood out to you? and What will you take away from this book? Marilyn Enger is part of the book club and I always look forward to hearing what she has to say. Month after month she shares what she has learned and how she is going to live her life differently because of this new learning. She is the living embodiment of the saying “when you know better, do better”. She is living out the Christmas story. Saying “YES” to helping bring about God’s Kingdom one step at a time. One intentional decision at a time.

I must admit that I struggled writing this sermon because I don’t want you to think that what I’m saying is easy. Please do not hear that answering God’s call is met through simple determination, as if it’s some easy tasks that can be checked off a to-do list. Christmas is God’s divine “YES” to us! God is willing to do the hard work. God is determined to be in relationship with us. God is determined to love us because and in spite of ourselves. God is determined to show up in all situations. And in return we say “YES” to God. We show up. We do our best. And when we fail, we try all over again. The Christmas story isn’t easy. It is filled with the joy and pain and all the complexities of being human. That is why we revisit it every year. It is a story we must be reminded of over and over again. It is a call that we must hear over and over again. It is an invitation we must receive over and over again. This is not easy work. But we remember that this ‘wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’ is for all time and will be there lighting the way until all manner of things shall be well.

We are invited into the Christmas story to be part of God’s “YES”. The Christmas story—God incarnate—is for you. God took on flesh out of an abundance of love for you. You are invited to be an active participant in this Christmas story. For unto us a child is born.