

The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Day

HOW BEAUTIFUL

Isaiah 52:7-10

Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Day

Analysis by Paul Jaster

*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.*

DIAGNOSIS: Badly Bruised and Bleeding

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Depressing Bad

News of Discomfort and Despair

We certainly don't have to go far to hear the depressing bad news of discomfort and despair. We are bombarded by it in the media every day. Bad news sells. I guess we like to hear about people who have it worse than we do. Even Tiger Wood's sterling reputation is now tarnished in the tabloids, and his body and self-image too bruised to play in his own tournament. For many of life's veterans, Christmas is not a happy time but a downer, empty and depressing. It's when their hearts hurt most because of many griefs and losses. Deaths and tragedies make the front-page headlines while a few warm-fuzzies are buried on the last page. Even Isaiah's majestic opus is front-loaded with bad news. With one notable exception (Isa. 25), the good stuff doesn't start happening until chapters 40-55.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : At War

But it isn't just that life is bruising and depressing. God is "at war" with those who have rebelled and don't recognize their real owner and do not trust him. To later speak of "peace" first implies "war." That is the headline news for Isaiah's first 39 chapters. Read Isaiah 1 as the foil to Isaiah 52 & Luke 2. "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know [me]" (Isaiah 1:3). "Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil...who have forsaken the Lord,...who are utterly estranged!" (Isaiah 1:4). "Daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard,...like a besieged city" (Isaiah 1:8). Sounds like war to me. And those who were besieged after the fall of the Jerusalem in 587 b.c.e. had the bruises and the sores and the bleeding wounds from head to foot to prove it. So do we.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : The Forgiving God Absent from Zion

If we will not submit to God's rule and respond with trusting faith, three things will happen. Or so Isaiah and his prophetic

bunker-buddies tell us—and they are all connected; part of one package; one “ugly” package: First, God will turn us over to other rulers. Alien, less magnanimous ones. Initially, foreign rulers of a temporal kind. But, they are just puppets and ruled by a higher power, too. Ultimately the alien, foreign rulers are sin and death and the damning judgment of the relentless law of God applied against us. Second, God will leave Zion (in other words, God won’t be “with us” or “for us”). Third, rather than God forgiving sin, there is a day of reckoning and an accounting for it.

PROGNOSIS: Wondrously Saved and Healed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Forgiving God Returns & Reigns in Christ*

But with the birth of Jesus, God makes a gracious, magnanimous, unilateral decision and three counter movements begin to happen. God returns to Zion—which clearly indicates that God has forgiven sin. And God takes ownership and charge of us in such a way that the rule of God can be evident for everyone to see. Movement “begins” because the birth of Jesus, his incarnation, just gets God on the scene. That alone is not salvific. It will also take a dying and a rising, a real death and resurrection, to break us from the tyrannical rule of sin and death. But these three great moments in Jesus’ life are part of one beautiful package-God’s gift to us in Christ. This is Emmanuel, God-with-us. And this particular God-with-us is also God-for-us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *At Peace*

And so the radiant and joyful oracle of Isaiah is fulfilled: “How 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.’” Little did Isaiah expect that these “beautiful feet” would belong to the angel of the Lord who shouts the Christmas headline, “Do not be

afraid; for see-I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Nor, would have Isaiah ever guessed that the "holy arm of God" bared "before the eyes of all the nations" should be flexed first in a baby wrapped in bands of cloth, and later extended by a bruised and beaten man nailed upon a cross. Or, that that the "sentinels" who would "sing for joy" would be an angelic host belting it out for Bethlehem's shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth"-not to mention the church of Jesus Christ that echoes that glad refrain. Or, that God's glorious redemption of the ruins of Jerusalem should spill out so broadly to all people. But, that's the way God works-at unexpected times, in unexpected ways, in unexpected places.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Uplifting Good News of Comfort and Joy*

And the bottom line is this: "The Lord has comforted his people." Or, to use that foundational imagery of Isaiah 1: the bleeding wounds have been drained, bound up, and softened with the "oil" of God's love and forgiveness (Isaiah 1:6). And that "oil" is God's Messiah-the Anointed One poured out on us through our re-birth into his baptism. Isaiah says it clearly in his fourth and greatest "Suffering Servant Song": "He was wounded for our transgression, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). A pretty ugly scene for him, but beautiful for us. No wonder the shepherds were: first, so willing to make "haste" and go and "see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord had made know to [them]"; second, so eager "to make known what had been told them about this child" (Luke 2:17); and three, so ready to return to their labors "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them" (Luke 2:20).

Ultimately, that is our calling, too, in response to this amazingly great good news. To become those beautiful, swift-footed messengers who bring good news and announce salvation even as we go about our daily life. Thanks to this wondrous child, the bruised become the healed. The wounded become healers. And we respond to God's good news with that tri-fold WOW! of Worship, Outreach and Witness. This, too, is part of that one package-God's gift to us in Jesus Christ.

And if the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib, it really shouldn't be all that difficult for us with the help of the Holy Spirit to figure this all out. Simply look at the crèche, Luther says in his great Christmas sermon (Roland Bainton, The Martin Luther Christmas Book. page 50): "Mary is the figure of Christianity, that is, all Christians who wrap the newborn Child in the word of the Gospel. The swaddling clothes signify the preaching of the Gospel; the manger signifies the place where Christians come together to hear the word of God. The ox and the ass stand for us."

Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth.