

A PROPHET'S VISION

Knowing Jesus

Matthew 12:9-21

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Bethany Church

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I enjoy the excitement of children during Christmas season. Their enthusiasm is infectious. I read of a father who asked his small daughter months before Christmas what present she wanted. She said, "I want a baby brother." To everyone's surprise and delight, her mother returned from the hospital on Christmas Eve with a baby boy in her arms. When the father repeated the question next year, there was less hesitation. "If it wouldn't be too uncomfortable for Mommy, I would like a pony!"

The imprint of experience is very strong, isn't it? It is with all of us. Many people wrestle with very difficult and painful pasts. Christmas for them is often stressful.

Carla was one of them. She had a very unhappy childhood. As Christmas and the time for her to return to her childhood home approached, she would suffer nightmares. By the time Christmas arrived, she was thoroughly exhausted and emotionally spent. The holidays could not pass soon enough.

For Reginald, it was not the painful childhood, but the lack of family. Christmas reminded him that he was orphaned and had no brothers or sisters. He always felt out of place wherever he was during the holidays.

The first Christmas after my father died was very emotional. We opened gifts he had purchased, listened to a Christmas song he had recorded and shed a bunch of tears. Occasionally, we gathered as a family in a tight circle and hugged each other. We called it a family hug. The family hugs that Christmas were particularly emotional. The hugs of family and the thoughtfulness of friends brought comfort. Even more, the vision of eternal life in Jesus Christ helped us keep perspective despite the notable absence.

Although I enjoy the festivities of Christmas, I am mindful of those who struggle in this period. Yet I have good reason for them and all of us to celebrate. I have good news.

Through a prophet whose work spanned part of the seventh and eighth century B.C., God spoke this news. God spoke through Isaiah of a coming misfortune. Yet God wanted to comfort his people as well. In the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, God confronted Israel with their sins and its consequences. In the 27 chapters that followed, God spoke words of comfort and hope. In the first 39 chapters God warned and called people to repentance. In the last 27 chapters, God consoled people and called them to faith. Even though Isaiah foretold the fall of his people, he also spoke of God's compassion and deliverance for them. God's plan for them centered on one man.

Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will

proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope. (Matt 12:18-21, NIV)

God spoke of a special man. Chosen and loved, this man would be God's servant. His work would bring God delight. He would possess God's Spirit, announce God's justice, and yet not argue or yell. He would not be an insurrectionist or lead a revolt; yet in a world where justice is often defeated or imprisoned, he would lead it to victory one day. In doing so, he would not break a bruised reed nor snuff out a smoldering wick. Nations would put their hope in him.

St. Matthew remembered these words when he reflected on an incident with Jesus one Sabbath. Matthew saw a man with a shriveled hand in a synagogue. Religious leaders had little sympathy. A popular opinion was that people suffered because of their sins or their ancestors' sins. Consequently, the sick and handicapped were getting just deserts. Matthew could empathize. He had been a despised outcast, a tax collector hated by his countryman. Now he watched his religious leaders use religious law to contest this poor man's healing.

Sometimes, people are so taken with religious rules that they cannot see the hand of God blessing and healing.

They are more interested in a form of worship, a form of righteousness, a form of Christianity than in the presence of Christ who heals and liberates. They criticize other believers because their actions don't conform to their rules. They judge everything by their rules. They devalue individuals and dismiss God's power. They cannot see the hand of God because it does not fit with their vision. That is a temptation for church people. We become comfortable with rules that Christ may not comply with. God has certainly surprised humanity.

When God sent his son, he was not born in a palace. He wasn't even born in a home. Who would have looked in a stable? When Christ began the mission of bringing justice to victory, he didn't condemn the unjust. He ate with them. He befriended them.

Despite religious objections, Jesus healed a poor man in the synagogue in front of everybody. Matthew pondered it and remembered that the prophet Isaiah saw someone coming who would not hurt even a bruised reed. Matthew realized that prophesied servant was here when Jesus healed that poor man. Jesus came with gentleness and tenderness, and healed rather than condemned

You know what a reed is, don't you? You see them in shallow water. They stick up out of the water. They are

hollow in the center. You can use a reed as a snorkel. You can put the reed in your mouth and breath through it under water. Since they are hollow they break easily. Isaiah had warned the people of Israel not to rely on Egypt because leaning on them was like leaning on a reed. The reed will snap and cut the hand. "So will Egypt," he warned.

A bruised reed has a weakness in its wall. It is fragile. Even a small wind can topple it. Connie was that way. She was plagued with guilt. The words "Sorry" were as automatic as breathing. Everything was her fault. She never measured up. The weight of the world rested on her shoulders, and she couldn't believe people would like her or forgive her if she somehow failed them. She tried to measure up for Jesus as much as she did for anyone else. I remember the scene when she first discovered the truth. Jesus loved her and valued her, and her worthless feelings were ploys of the devil. Satan, the accuser of humanity, had deceived her and separated her from God's love and vision. Connie was a new woman. God filled Connie with a passion to bring that same gentle but pivotal liberation to many other women.

Whatever has bruised you, whether you suffer from your choices (as we all do to some extent), whether you have been a target of others' sins (as we all have been), whether you

are haunted with nightmares, riddled with self-doubt or crippled with infirmities, disease or addictions, Christmas reveals that God has sent his servant to embrace you. He won't break you. A bruised reed he will not break. A smoldering candle he will not snuff out.

We know about bruised reeds, but what about a smoldering candle? Is it an image of people where the fire of hope is in trouble? Are you one who battles depression? Does your future look bleak? Are you just hanging on? Are you smoldering? Is the fire of passion nearly gone? Do you struggle with a reason to live? Do you see no purpose, no joy in your future? Sometimes melted wax causes the wick to smolder by smothering the fire. You may be smothered by circumstance, a divorce, a bankruptcy, or a failure of some kind? Is that you? Or is your candle is burning low? Sometimes there is little wick left on a candle, and it retreats into the melted wax that is left. For some of us, the years have gone by and this perishable body won't support many more. With age has come disease and impairment, and you feel like you are smoldering, fighting to keep the fire burning. You are a smoldering wick. Isaiah said that the Egyptian army was snuffed out like a wick at the Red Sea. At that sea their lives ended. In view of this, a smoldering wick looks like someone at the

threshold of death. It looks like someone whose life hangs in the balance.

The one who came on Christmas did not come to finish us off. He came to give us life. Bruised reeds and smoldering candles need not fear the child of Christmas. He is our hope and life. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." Jesus said, "I am the resurrection from death; I am the resurrection and the life." There could not be better news for someone smoldering or someone hurting. Jesus won't only be tender; he will be healing.

Amy was a bruised reed. As far as her hope, it was smoldering in a bed of melted wax. Day after day and week after week this friend of mine wasted away in a hospital room. Depression rose around her like impenetrable walls of a prison. No one could reach her. The psychologists, the psychiatrists, the prescription drugs, nothing could free her from that prison. One day a believer met with her. He said, "You'll get better." Those words could have been spoken a thousand times and slipped off her like grease on Teflon. But that day those words carried power. Something mysterious, something supernatural gave those words power. They penetrated those walls with a tiny shaft of light and hope. It was actually enough for her to eventually leave the hospital. When she arrived home, that same believer

visited her. He gave her a Bible and said, "This is God's love letter to you." She read its pages and discovered Jesus and his love. Soon her days were filled with the companionship of Jesus and she cultivated a spirit of thankfulness. She found true the promise God made through another prophet:

I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. (Jer. 31:13, NIV)

When you understand the prophet's vision, you'll realize Christmas is for you. Whether you are a bruised reed dreading this season, whether you are a smoldering wick seeing no future, or whether you are excited, Christmas is for you. Christmas is for you because Jesus came for you. Even now, Jesus is your bread and life. Won't you welcome him? He doesn't dismiss you. He values you. He came for you. Welcome him!