

### **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 the nation, 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 Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually, 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 onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

### **Matthew 11:2-11**

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

### **Christmas Could Disappoint Us**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

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Charles Schultz, Peanuts. Sally’s sitting in a beanbag chair watching television. Linus, reading to her about the real meaning of Christmas from a scholar’s point of view.

“Listen to this, Sally. It says here the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem is said to have been to all the world probably just means the Roman Empire at the time.

And listen to this. When we read that there was no room in the inn, the word “inn” is better translated “guest room.” The intention of course is to contrast a place of human lodging with a place for feeding animals. Not only that, Sally, listen to this – the name Bethlehem itself is interesting. It means “house of bread” or it can mean “house of fighting.” That’s fascinating. What do you think, Sally?” said Linus. And she stands up

and looks at Linus and says, “I think if I don’t get every single thing I want for Christmas this year, I’m going to totally gross out.” She will be disappointed. She will be disappointed in Christmas, and will totally gross out. If we don’t get everything we want, Christmas is a disappointment. It can be. It makes me think of the innkeeper, of all that was the innkeeper. Frederick Buechner reflecting on the innkeeper – of course, none of this is in the Bible, it’s only a guess. What was going on with the innkeeper? “I remember very well,” the innkeeper said, “I remember very well the evening they arrived. I was looking over my accounts. I looked up in time to see a woman coming through the door. She was walking in that slow, heavy-footed way that women have in their last months, as though she was walking in a dream, or on the bottom of the sea, and her husband stood there, a little behind her, tongue-tied, a helpless kind of man, I thought, nothing significant about them.” Edgar Guest is more generous with the lack of insightfulness of the innkeeper as he writes, “Oh if I had known. I had no hint, no hint to me was shown. I didn’t let them in. She was poorly clad, he hadn’t much to say, so I ordered them away. She seemed tired and it was late and they begged so hard that I feeling sad for her state allowed them in my stable to stay.” Nothing special in that couple. If that’s what Emmanuel means, “God with us,” God help us.

Sally said, “If I don’t get every single thing I want for Christmas this year, I’m going to totally gross out.” There have been years people have not gotten what they wanted and have been totally grossed out. Christmas has been a disappointment for the people of Israel who were looking for someone to save them from life. They wanted a hero. Christmas will be a disappointment for any of us are hoping someone will bring it, Christmas, to us. Christmas may not come if we spend our time hoping someone will bring it to us. It was true of Israel. What they wanted was to be saved from life, from the enemy, from hurt, from life, from the Babylonians. They wanted a hero. And there was this king of Persia, and Isaiah and his friends thought maybe the King of Persia, the King of Iran, maybe that’s the messiah. And then those words from Isaiah that led people to believe that Cyrus was. “His power will never end. Peace will last forever. He will rule David’s kingdom. He will make it grow strong. He will always rule with honesty and justice, the Lord almighty, the Lord all powerful” and the child born to us, Cyrus coming to us, save us from fear. We wait for someone to save us, people always looking for someone like that, always looking for a hero, someone to save us.

It was in a coffee shop a couple Saturdays ago, it was a Starbuck’s. Leonard Sweet had a theory about Starbuck’s. If you’re a fan of Starbuck’s, you know what I’m talking about. You walk in and you’re greeted by rich opaque colors from every angle. In the background appealing music thick with atmosphere refrains from masking the almost whistle of the espresso machine. Dim lighting keeps the mood relaxed but suggestive and a melody of complex coffee smells oozes from every surface that you touch. I’m in Starbuck’s two Saturdays ago. I know there is a vocabulary with Starbuck’s. It goes, “I’ll have a café mocha carmello marshmallow frappacino grande.” I don’t know the vocabulary, so I just said, “What I want is a medium coffee. Don’t put any sugar in it. Don’t put any milk in it, or cream or anything else in it. I want it black, and I want it strong, and I want it now.” And I’m wearing a baseball cap that a member of the church gave me, and on the cap above the bill of the cap it says “NFL alum.” National Football

League alum. And this guy who had ordered a café mocha carmello marshmallow frappacino grande comes over to where I am, looking at my cap, thinking I played in the NFL, maybe one of those old St. Louis Cardinals. Perhaps he was with Lombardi at Green Bay on the frozen tundra, thought I was a star. Well, it figures. Big enough to eat hay, eh? I understand why he thought that. And he said to me, “I just want to thank you. I just want to thank you for your years of service.” He thought I’d just come back from Iraq. I said – you don’t know what hat you’re wearing – I said, “It’s the hat, isn’t it.” I said, “I’m not a football player, I’m a Methodist preacher, I’m writing a sermon and it’s Saturday and I’ve got to stay awake till I get the darn thing written, and that’s why the strong coffee.” And you know what? He took his frappacino and left.

We all want a hero at Christmas, someone like Cyrus, to save us from life, to save us from harm, it’s a violent world, things happen that shouldn’t happen. Let the Messiah come, may the Messiah save us from life. It’s the reason Cyrus looked like the Christ to the people, he came and saved them from Babylon. He did. They wanted to know God was with them- Emmanuel, God with us, that’s what it means. Cyrus is not the Christ. The Christ is one who doesn’t save us from life, but pushes us into it.

John the Baptist was disappointed with Christmas. You and I can understand that. I mean, things had not gone well. This had not been a good year for John the Baptist, because he was in prison, and he wondered about this relative of his and what he was doing, and so he sent word, “Are you the Messiah, Cousin? Or do we look for another?” Some people are like that at Christmas, you know. John the Baptist, a very dour soul. Garrison Keillor talks about Pastor Tommerdahl who every year preached a sermon called “The True Meaning of Christmas,” and if you went to church with visions of sugarplums dancing in your head, he stopped the music. Santa Claus had no prominent place in his theology. He had a gift for making you feel like you’d better go home and give all the presents you got to the poor, and spend Christmas with a bowl of soup, and don’t get too many noodles in the soup. He preached a straight gospel, and he said the gospel is meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Pastor Tommerdahl afflicted Lutherans. He was a John the Baptist type, you know, he preached a hard message. It was almost bad news, the gospel that he preached. He told people to repent, he told them to turn around. He told them they were sick, and they needed to look at that, and he was right. He was good at it, too. It was a gospel of bad news, and he was good at it.

Did you ever hear anyone preach like John? Jesus praising John as the best there ever was, he was so good he could talk people into the water and leave them feeling wet, and they didn’t mind. And then when he got them in the water he did something even more odd. He pushed them under, and they said “Thank you.” The greatest preacher of all time, he could make Robert Schuler seem negative. He could make Billy Graham seem tentative. He could make Joel Osteen seem hesitant. He could make Bennie Hinn seem dull, and Joyce Meyers seem humble, and I don’t even want to think what he could make your preachers seem at your church. John the Baptist told them they were lost, told them to repent, told them they were bad, told them to submit. And they put him in jail, and he wondered if there would ever be a Messiah. “Jesus, are you the Messiah, or are we going to look for another one?” Jesus answered and said “Tell John the blind are seeing, the

deaf are hearing, the lame are walking, the dead are coming back to life. Tell John to get a life. Tell him good news. Tell him look around. Tell him choose Christmas.” People are not lost, they’re found, or could be. People are not helpless, they’re hopeful, or can be. People who walk in darkness, they see a great light, and they can walk toward it. Do you see the world? You look around, and you can choose Christmas. You and I can decide. This morning we’re privileged to participate in two baptisms at the 10:45 service. Interesting baptisms, it’s a little girl, a baby, and her daddy. Delightful parents, they want from the church some direction as to how to raise kids, as if we knew. The baptism of Peter, the father, Peter telling me when he was in college he worked at a church as a custodian in southwest Fort Collins, a Baptist church. One night his first week on the job he was locking up the church building and the lights were off, and he was walking behind the altar and in the back of the sanctuary he fell into the baptismal pool and he said “All these years I thought I was baptized because I fell into the pool. But you know,” he said, “I began to realize there’s a difference between falling into water and feeling all wet, and choosing to dedicate your life, to try to make your life something, because you’re something special.”

John the Baptist was disappointed in Christmas, and he wondered, “Are you the Christ? Do we look for another?” John the Baptist told people to repent, to look around, and if we do, what do we see? Christmas will not come to us if we look around and fail to see the good in the world. It will not come if we do not light a candle of hope. Christmas will not come if we spend our time waiting for someone to help make it happen for us, or if we spend our time looking around to see how bad things are. It will come if we look into the manger. Christmas will come if we do that. Christmas came to our church last night at the dinner theater. Christmas came because those kids, those young people in our church dressed up like Peanuts characters, and at the end of the evening Peppermint Patti, Lucy, Linus, Charlie Brown, Marcie, Pigpen, (his father said, “That was typecast”). And at the end of the evening, we looked into the manger and we saw the baby Jesus, we did, all of us who were there, we saw the baby Jesus. It was a remarkable event. Lucy was Mary, the Christmas queen. Snoopy the dog was Joseph. Snoopy the dog was Joseph, and when you looked into the manger, the baby Jesus was a bird. The message was the same, God with us. The food was great, the service was wonderful, the play was funny and well done. When we looked into the manger last night, Christmas came to the church last night, and I know it did. I know it did because people said to me, a number of people, maybe five or six people, and if five or six people say something to you at church, you know there must be another thirty or forty who think it. Five or six people said to me, they said, “You know what? You look at the world sometimes and you get discouraged with young people. And yet you come to an event like this, and you see who these kids are, and all of a sudden you know there’s hope. The actors and actresses, the writers of the play, the lights, the cooks, the servers, it just makes you hopeful about the future and reminds us what good we can do, and what those kids are doing.” You see it in Bethlehem in the eyes of the child and the youth. To come to Christmas we’ve got to look down into the eyes of the child down in the manger. To come to Christmas is not to see the hero who will save us or the sinner we’ve become who cannot be saved, but to see God with us, Emmanuel.

Emily is a young mother in our church. She and Rob have three kids. One if five, and then twins. I don't know how they do it. She told me this week, she said, "We're spending a lot of time playing with our little indestructible people nativity set, reenacting the Christmas story over and over again, and at the end, of course, baby Jesus is born, and we proclaim, "Happy birthday, baby Jesus." We're trying to focus on the real meaning of Christmas, Jesus first, and then many, many years later came Santa. I have a dear friend who has a birthday, and I gave my friend a call to wish her happy birthday. I don't know how it is with others, but my kids don't like me being on the phone. It causes them anxiety. I was talking to my friend and we'd been on the phone about ten minutes and at the end of the call I said to her, I said "Happy birthday, I love you. Bye." And it was that my daughter overheard as she said to me after I hung up the phone she said to me, "Mom, you're talking to baby Jesus." And I thought, "Yeah, I'm going to show them baby Jesus if I can." Emily has looked into the manger. Her children help her do it. Children always do. They help us see it. We see in the manger God. We see God with us.

There is a story about a grandpa who was babysitting a four-year-old named Jason. He read him a story, tucked him into bed, went downstairs, was watching television. A storm came up, a big thunderstorm, lightning, thunder. The little boy was scared. "Grandpa, I'm scared. Come up here and help me." Grandpa's watching television, didn't want him to be afraid, and said to him, "Don't worry, you'll be all right. You know God loves you." The little boy answered down the steps, "I know God loves me, I just need something with skin on it." We look into the manger and we see God comes to us with skin on it, the word made flesh. When we look into the manger, we see the love that God has for our world, and the hope God has placed in our ability to redeem the world, which we need to do. The shepherds look into the manger. They came to the place they had never been before and then they realized they'd never leave that place. It was like the center of the universe for those shepherds, and all was still and quiet and the silence was even silent, and they saw something. They saw the child, they saw their own children. They saw their sheep, they saw the good shepherd, and they stood up, and they ran out praising God. They saw God in the manger. And the Magi saw it, they looked into the eyes of the Christ child. They had shopped for the child. They brought gifts to the child. They shopped until they dropped. When they saw the child, they dropped. And then they went back home another way, and they went back home being different wise men than they had been. They saw the child, they saw life, they saw their lives, their journey through life, they saw eternal life, and they shopped till they dropped, and they dropped to their knees.

What makes a shepherd rise up and praise God is the same thing that makes wise men and women drop to their knees looking into the manger on Christmas day. Could it be the God they saw with them was one that had more power than Cyrus with his army, or George Bush with his army, or anybody else with their army? Because the power of the God they worshipped empowered people to look into the dark night and see the dawn coming. Or could it be that the God they saw was the one time in history when they knew for the first time in history, there's no need to look any further in history. Because this is the love of God, right there in that child, exemplified in a number of ways perhaps. Christmas is not a holiday to be taking us away from life. It's a time in which we gain perspective about how to live life fully every day. Christmas is not some distant hope that

someone will save us from hard times. It's the awareness that there's a God with us and when the hard times come, we can make it, with the grace and the goodness of God. Christmas is not a happening given to us, it's a choice we make to receive it. Christmas is not to disappoint us when we do not receive what we want. We will not totally gross out, because we will not totally get what we want. But that's okay, because while we may not receive everything we want, if we look into the eyes of the child of Bethlehem, we will have received the only thing we really need, which is the awareness of Emmanuel, which means God with us. No reason to look any further.