

The Kindness of the Lord

Isaiah 63:7-9

John Breon

We see God's kindness against the background of "the hard side of Christmas." For some people, this season highlights their loneliness, loss, pain, fear. We see this hard side of Christmas in the Scriptures (Matthew 2). King Herod gets news of the birth of a new king and determines to eliminate this rival. So he orders the slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem. Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee for their lives and become refugees in Egypt.

This passage in Isaiah comes from a time when the people have gone into exile and experience God's judgment.

Remember: God's kindness—acts of mercy, covenant loyalty and faithfulness. Trust that the same God is with us now and will be with us and help us.

Theme of God's kindness in Paul

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. (Titus 3:4-5)

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:6-7)

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? (Rom 2:4)

Consider the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness.
(Rom 11:22)

God's kindness/grace/mercy/faithfulness, given in Jesus Christ, leads us to turn to God and leads us as we walk with God. God's loyalty and faithfulness inspire us to be loyal and faithful. God's grace changes us.

Author James Michener is famous for his massive historical novels like *The Source*, *The Covenant*, and *Texas*. Michener's style drew its strength and beauty from characters fleshed out with extensive genealogies and deep cultural roots. Yet he himself was a man without a birth certificate. Abandoned as an infant and raised as a foster son in the Michener family headed by a widowed woman, James never knew his biological parents.

Despite his generous spirit and kind nature, Michener's accomplishments irritated one of the relatives in his adopted family. In a rage of jealousy, mean-spiritedness and sheer nastiness, some anonymous relative—signing letters “a real Michener”—felt impelled to write hate-filled, hurtful notes to James whenever his name gained fame or newspaper space. Even after his Pulitzer Prize, this poison-pen writer charged James with besmirching the good Michener name—which, he said, “You have no right to use”—and denounced him as a fraud. But the phrase the anonymous hate-monger used that cut most deeply was, “Who do you think you are, trying to be better than you are?”

The final letter James Michener received from his unknown relative came in 1976 after President Ford had presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The acidic note read, “Still using a name that isn't yours. Still a fraud. Still trying to be better than you are.”

Michener said that the words of that accusation burned into his soul. But he turned its negative power into a life challenge. Michener acknowledged his nit-picking kinfolk, and admitted to missing the nasty letters when his relative presumably died. “He was right in all his accusations,” Michener confessed, “I have spent my life trying to be better than I was, and am brother to all who have the same aspirations” (James A.

Michener, *The World Is My Home: A Memoir* 484-86; cited on *Homiletics Online*).

The passage in Isaiah mentions the “angel of God’s face” or presence that saved God’s people. “The angel of the Lord” represents God and shows God’s presence. The prophet is recalling Exodus —deliverance, rescue, redemption; guidance, protection, provision in the wilderness. God was getting ready to perform a new exodus in bringing the exiles home from Babylon.

God did something new and greater in the coming of Jesus—not just the angel of God’s presence, but God with us. In this greatest of God’s acts of kindness/mercy/grace/faithfulness Jesus is our salvation.

Many rejected him, and still do, resisting and opposing him like Herod. That’s the hard side of Christmas. But nothing can finally stop his salvation—it is available to all who will receive him. And that’s the glorious good news of Christmas.

Bob Benson was a preacher and author and publisher who battled throat cancer for several years until his death in 1986. In one of his books, he tells about a Christmas when he felt most wonderfully blessed. His children would all be home. Bob and some of his family and friends had the privilege of leading the Christmas Eve service at their church. And just before Christmas he found out that he would not have to have the surgery in January that had been anticipated.

But he goes on to tell about some families who did not have such good news that Christmas: a young couple in their church whose apartment had burned a few days before Christmas; some family members who could not make the trip to be with the rest; a friend of theirs who lost the struggle with cancer and was buried just before Christmas.

Still, it was Christmas...because *Jesus is born*. There is no Christmas without Him. And all the rest is just tinsel on the tree.

And Christmas is the time to sing those eloquent, life-giving words—
“Jesus is born, Jesus is born.”

Just as those words came and changed a barn filled with cows and straw into a shrine, a hillside dotted with sheep and shepherds into a cathedral, a sky filled with stars into a message from the Father—so they come to you:

as old as eternity—
as fresh as the morning—
as simple as a baby—
as majestic as a psalm—
Warm as a mother’s arms—
Mighty as God Himself—
Jesus is born.

All of the celebrations of our Christmases begin at a manger with Him.

We say, Merry Christmas, because He is our joy and our happiness.

We say, Goodwill to men, because He is our peace and our pardon.

We say, Good tidings of great joy, because He is our announcement and proclamation.

We say, Good cheer, because He is our hope and our confidence.

We say, Emmanuel, because He is with us.

We sing, Glory to God, because His light blesses us.

The light shined in the darkness and it still shines, and shines, and shines. And when our lights flicker and die—when those with whom we have long celebrated are gone—when we can no longer share needs or exchange gifts or sing songs—it will still be Christmas because Jesus is Born, Jesus is Born. (*In Quest of the Shared Life* 90-95)

Isaiah called the people to remember who the Lord is and what the Lord had done. We also remember who we are. We are God’s people because Jesus is born and because of all he does. We also need to remember how we’ve failed to live and God’s people. Then we repent and renew covenant with God.

What has God done in your life? Who are the people who have helped you know Jesus? What experiences has God used to touch you? What has God done for you this year (2013)? What do you hope God will do in 2014?

The God we have come to know and love and trust is the God of our future, the God who is with us and who leads us.

If all the sleeping folks will wake up,
and all the lukewarm folks will fire up,
and all the dishonest folks will confess up,
and all the disgruntled folks will sweeten up,
and all the discouraged folks will cheer up,
and all the depressed folks will look up,
and all the estranged folks will make up,
and all the gossipers will shut up,
and all the dry bones will shake up,
and all the true soldiers will stand up,
and all the church members will pray up—
and the Savior for all is lifted up—
then...

you can have the world's greatest revival.

(Richard Cardinal Cushing, *Homiletics Online*)

Let's let God revive us.