

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 12, 2021**

**CHRISTMAS SPOKEN HERE
Isaiah 40:1-11**

If you like Christmas shops, you'll be happy to know that Countryliving.com has a list of 12 of the best year-round Christmas stores in America. One is in Pigeon Forge, TN. Another (Bronner's CHRISTmas Wonderland) is in Frankenmuth, MI. The list includes stores in Gettysburg, PA, and Richmond, Harrisonburg, and Middleburg, VA. (The store in Middleburg is called 'the Christmas Sleigh.') There is even a Christmas store in Miami, FL on the list. Maybe you have been to one or more of these stores. Or maybe you have a favorite Christmas store that is not on the list. Mary Sue reminded me that there used to be a little Christmas shop in Occoquan, but it is no longer there.

In his book of Christmas sermons called *Christmas Spoken Here*, John Killinger tells of "staring through the window of a beautiful little Christmas shop. It was packed with Christmas items, even though Christmas was still six months away. There were exquisite creches from Italy, Germany, and Norway. There were fuzzy-faced elves and jolly old Santa Clauses, sleighs and reindeer of every size and description, bells and trees, and music boxes. There were nutcrackers and candles and electric lights, angels and wise men and little drummer boys, stars and snow(people) and gingerbread cutouts.

"The little shop was fairly bursting with Christmas, and a loudspeaker broadcast a medley of Yuletide tunes. It was infectious, even in the summertime. And down in the corner of the front door, where no one could miss it, was the neatest touch of all. It was a small sign that said, 'Christmas Spoken Here.'"

Killinger doesn't say where this shop was. There is actually a store in Friday Harbor, WA, on San Juan Island north of Seattle, called "Christmas Spoken Here." That's the name of the store. I don't know if that is the store Killinger was writing about.

Killinger continues: "'Christmas Spoken Here.' I cannot imagine a better slogan for the church, at this season or any time of year, than that one. What could say better why we are here? God has entered human history to change its course forever. He has come as a Word, as something said, articulated, put in a message: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us' (John 1:14)." [Or, as it says in *The Message*: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." *Our* neighborhood. The neighborhood where *we* all live.]

Killinger says: "We remember the event each year in song and pageant and decoration. 'Christmas spoken here.' It has to be spoken here, for it is the basis of all we do.

"'Christmas Spoken Here.' It is an appropriate motto for us. The church ought always to speak Christmas. We ought always to be reminded of the Word God has spoken: the intelligible, important, and loving Word of His concern for us. And Christmas is the best

time of all the year for remembering it. ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.’ That is Christmas, and Christmas is spoken here. It will always be spoken here” (Killinger, *Christmas Spoken Here*).

Christmas *is* the best time of the year, the most wonderful time of the year, to remember and celebrate the auspicious, audacious act of God in sending His own Son to us as a helpless little baby, born in a stable, born a King, born to die for us as an expression of His unparalleled, undying, self-sacrificing love for undeserving sinners. Christmas may be the best time, but it is not the only time of the year to remember it. As with things like prayer and thanksgiving and worship, there is never a time – *never a time* – when it is not time to remember and celebrate God’s Christmas gift to us, lavished on us with the fullness of His love and grace.

“Christmas Spoken Here.” I think Killinger is onto something. The *language* of Christmas *should* be spoken here. The *message* of Christmas should be spoken here. The *spirit* of Christmas should be expressed here. The *heart* of Christmas – the loving, grace-filled heart of God – should be communicated here. It should be on display in our actions and interactions with others. And not just when we come together as a church for worship witness or study or service or fellowship or food and fun, but in our personal lives, too. In your life and mine.

The message of Christmas is the message of the Bible. It is the central message of the Bible. To say “Christmas (is) spoken here” is to say *the gospel* is spoken here. It means *grace* is spoken here – the grace of God that brings salvation to sinners who would otherwise have no hope of ever being saved and made right with God. It means *love* is spoken here – the unconditional, unearned love and favor of God, from which nothing in life or death will ever be able to separate us (Romans 8:38-39). It means *forgiveness* is spoken here, both the forgiveness of God freely given and our forgiveness of one another. It means *peace* is spoken here – peace *with* God, the peace *of* God, and, by God’s grace, peace with one another. It means *hope* is spoken here – because the coming of Jesus into the world and the promise of His coming again give us reason to hope, with a sure and certain hope, that wrong will be made right when Jesus comes in sight, and God’s kingdom *will* prevail over every enemy.

Christmas is spoken here. The message of Christmas is that the baby whose birth we celebrate was in fact God incarnate. God in flesh and blood. As the angel-messenger from God said to Joseph, Jesus, whose name means “The LORD Saves,” would also be called Immanuel, which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:14).

Jesus was more than a remarkable human being. He was not simply a man of humble birth who made a mark on the world. He was more than a great moral teacher and philosopher, more than a great healer and humanitarian. He was more than just the most extraordinary person who ever lived. (As if you can just say the word “just” about the most extraordinary person in the history of the world.) Jesus was all these things, but more. If Christmas is spoken here, we must say that Jesus was not only fully human but fully God. He was truly God incarnate, God in flesh and blood. Immanuel. God with us.

The apostle Paul says this about Jesus in Colossians 1:19-20: “For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him” – in Jesus – “and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things ... by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.”

A little later, in Colossians 2:9, he says: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” *The Message* says: “Everything of God gets expressed in Him.” *Everything*. He is God in a human body.

The message of Christmas is not limited to the New Testament. Christmas is spoken in the Old Testament as well. One of the places where the message of Christmas is spoken in the Old Testament is this passage we read from Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40 marks a dramatic turning point in the prophecies of Isaiah. The dominant note in Isaiah 1-39 is the judgment of God to come upon the people of Israel for their stubborn disobedience and unfaithfulness to God. Isaiah 40 begins a new section where Isaiah declares a message of comfort and hope for sinners through the gift of the Savior whom God will send. The vision of Isaiah, according to Ray Ortlund, Jr., “was filled with nearly unbelievable divine grace for sinners. He was, above all, a messenger of good news for bad people from a surprising God” (Ortlund, Jr., *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, 234).

Listening to Isaiah, we learn that the message of Christmas really is a message of comfort and hope for sinners who are helpless to fix what is wrong with us and our world, completely powerless to make ourselves acceptable to God. Yet, God comes to us. What we could not and cannot do for ourselves, God has done for us. He has taken the burden of our sins upon Himself. What does Peter say of Jesus? “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree [the cross], so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24). In Isaiah 40:2, God tells the prophet to tell the people of Jerusalem that “(their) sin has been paid for” – forgiven, by an act of God’s free grace.

This is the message at the heart of Christmas – at the heart of the Christian faith as a whole. Ortlund, writing on Isaiah 40, says: “Christianity is all about the saving grace of God.” Amen? Amen! “(God) overrules our stupidity with His own absolute pardon through the finished work of Christ on the cross” (Ortlund, Jr., 235). Christmas is God’s answer to the stupidity of our sin. And, you know, however we may try to rationalize it or justify it, sin really is stupid. The fact that we all do it doesn’t mean it isn’t stupid. But God, in His grace, has provided the way out of it.

The reason we need the Christmas message of God’s comfort, His forgiveness and grace is because of our failure to live in faithful obedience to Him. It is our sin, our failure, our disobedience, our willfulness that makes Christmas so totally necessary. Just when you realize how right and just it would be for God to be angry with you – with us all – the Bible reminds us that God’s *kindness* leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). It tells us that when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared (i.e., when Jesus came), He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy (Titus 3:4-5).

This is the language of Christmas. And it is spoken here. Christmas tells us that God looks at us not with a frown or an angry scowl, but with a loving smile. He comes to us with a heart full of love. With an invitation. To be sure, if you refuse His invitation, if you reject His gift of salvation, there are consequences for this life and eternity. But where Christmas is spoken, there will always be a message of comfort and hope for sinners.

Verses 3-5 in Isaiah speak of a voice calling in the desert: “Prepare the way for the LORD” (40:3). This prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, who came as the forerunner of Jesus (see Matthew 1; Mark 1; Luke 3). In this prophecy, Isaiah announced and John the Baptist confirmed that the King *is* coming. The Lord Himself *is* coming. And when He comes (as He did at Christmas), He will (and did) make things different. He will (and does) make *us* different.

Isaiah is saying that God *will* accomplish His saving purposes. Every valley, every mountain, all the rough ground and the rugged places – they will all be changed (40:4). The thing to understand is that Isaiah is not talking about a literal earthquake. He is not talking about feeling the earth move under our feet. He is talking about a new moral and spiritual topography, a new spiritual and relational landscape. “He is talking,” as Ortlund says, “about the disruptive advance of salvation” (Ortlund, Jr., 236). Disruptive, yes; disrupting all our sinful patterns and ways. But redemptive. And restorative. He is talking about how Jesus brings order to our souls, peace to our hearts and minds, and healing to our relationships.

Isaiah is also saying that in and through Jesus – the King who would come, and did come, and will come again – the glory of God will be revealed for the whole world to see. You can count on it, for God Himself has decreed it: “For the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (40:5). Some of you can probably even recite it, or hear it in your mind, from the magnificent strains of Handel’s *Messiah* (which, if you think about it, was contemporary Christian music when it was composed and first performed in the 1740s).

The “glory” of God is not easy to define. It has to do with the weightiness of who He is, with His magnificence and beauty and worthiness to be worshiped and adored. But God’s glory is also displayed in humility. As we have already noted in John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” But there is more to it. John continues: “We have seen His glory, the glory of the Only Begotten (Son), who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The glory of God is revealed in both the humility of Jesus – the humble circumstances of His birth and earthly life – and His exaltation as our sovereign Lord and King.

Look very briefly at verses 6-8. There Isaiah contrasts our transience, our impermanence, with the certainty and eternity of God’s Word. If you ever wonder if God will fulfill a particular promise He has made, if you question whether He will keep His word, His answer to you is in verse 8:

The grass withers and the flowers fall,

But the word of our God stands forever.

Your earthly life and mine will come to an end. But God's word will not fail. Ever. His word will stand firm forever.

Finally, there is this wonderful word from God to us in verse 9. The angels who told the shepherds about the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem were not the first to announce His coming. The angels spoke the language of Christmas. But so did Isaiah. What did he say to the residents of all the towns of Judah? "Here is your God" (40:9).

He was not born in a palace. He did not come to us in a raging whirlwind or in a devouring fire (to borrow Philip Yancey's words from *The Jesus I Never Knew*). He did not come in a demonstration of shock and awe or overwhelming power. He came to us as a helpless baby. "Here is your God!"

Philip Yancey reminds us that the arrival of God's Son on our planet took place in an animal shelter with no attendants present and nowhere to lay the newborn King but a feeding trough. The event that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal witnesses than human. A mule could have stepped on Him (Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, 36-37).

As I know that many of you know, Paul describes the humility and selflessness of Jesus in Philippians 2:

"Though He was God ...
 He made Himself nothing,
 Taking the very nature of a servant,
 Being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a man,
 He humbled Himself and became obedient to death –
 Even death on a cross.
 Therefore, God exalted Him to the highest place
 And gave Him the name that is above every name,
 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ...
 And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 To the glory of God the Father."
 (Philippians 2:6-11)

God is glorified, you see, when Jesus is exalted as our Savior and Lord and King. Why? Because Jesus *is* God. In His incarnate state He was God with us, at every moment revealing God to us so that we might truly know Him—and knowing Him, love Him and trust Him and follow Him.

Before he was famous, Max Lucado was, for a time, a missionary in Brazil. On a few occasions he served as a translator for an English-language speaker. Lucado would translate the speaker's message from English into Portuguese. He says: "I did my best to

allow (the speaker's) words to come through me. I was not at liberty to embellish or subtract. When the speaker gestured, I gestured. As his volume increased, so did mine. When he got quiet, I did, too."

In the same way, he says, while Jesus walked this earth, He was "translating" God all the time. When God the Father got louder, Jesus got louder. When the Father gestured, Jesus gestured (Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus*).

In Jesus, who is Himself God, we hear God's voice. And we see what God is like: Compassionate. Forgiving. Gracious. Loving and kind. Righteous and true. Strong and gentle. Unchanging in His character. Trustworthy. A God who would stop at nothing, but willingly set aside the glories of heaven to come to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, to a stable and then a cross, and gave His life for us and for our salvation. A God who spoke – and who continues to speak – the language of Christmas.

Christmas is spoken here. I hope you have heard it spoken here today. Let it be spoken – and heard and lived – in your life and mine. Always.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.