

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 9 & 10, 2017
John Crosby
A Promise to Save | Isaiah 12**

Last week Debbie Manning started us off on the road to Christmas—it's called Advent—and she did that by looking at a passage from the prophet Isaiah who was probably born 600 years before Jesus. We're going to take all four weeks of Advent, the preparation for Christmas, and look at it through the lens of this prophet. We would like to do that together, so I'm going to ask you if you would find where the prophet Isaiah is in the Bible. Isaiah 12 is what we are going to talk about today. That's on page 1037 in the pew Bibles. We'd like you to understand a whole chapter in the Bible in a way that you will never forget. It isn't as demanding as you might think...this chapter is only six verses long. We can do this together. My prayer is that you would keep the Bibles open for a while, whether you have it on your Kindle or your smartphone, and I want you to underline a couple of things. It seems odd to talk about Christmas from 600 years beforehand. The prophet started probably 1000 years before Jesus, just when the Israelites got into the Promised Land, and some of them were faithful and some were faithless. Some wrote down their history, and some just spoke, but Isaiah would be the most famous of all of the prophets. He spoke to what was called the southern kingdom. Israel had a civil war, and unlike the United States, when they had their civil war, Israel broke up into two countries: north and south. The south was Judah; Isaiah spoke to Judah. Now, he was so powerful that the founders of the Christian movement—the Jesus followers, the church fathers—called the book of Isaiah “the fifth gospel.” Actually the name Isaiah itself means “God saves.” Jesus does sermons throughout the New Testament, and His very first sermon comes out of the book of Isaiah. He opens the scroll to the prophet Isaiah and says, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me.”

Like Debbie said last week, Isaiah is separated into sections. There are three different parts of the book of Isaiah. The first thirty-nine chapters are when Isaiah is looking around at the bad things that are happening and saying, “What we need now is a real king, a good king,” and he talks about a king who would come to sit on the throne of David. Then chapters 40-55 talk about either a separate figure from the king or a king who would be like a servant, and the suffering of the servant would be for the people. The suffering and dying of the servant would save God's people. That was the part the Jews were puzzled with all the time.

And then the last eleven chapters of the book of Isaiah talk about how we get ready for it. They talk about a messenger of somebody who is to come.

Now, the book of Isaiah is either quoted or referred to about eighty different times in the New Testament stories, so it's all over the place. And at least ten of those times talk about this suffering servant who would come to die, save people from their sins, be buried in a rich man's tomb, and be a light to the Gentiles.

I want to take just a little bit of a rabbit hole here. I was finishing this sermon yesterday morning at Starbucks, and I'm talking about the three different parts of Isaiah and the king and the servant and the messenger...and I get ready to leave, literally get ready to leave, and I go *Oh rats, I haven't done my devotions*. So I sat down again, and this year I am trying to do that by listening to them. There is an audio devotional that does a passage of scripture every day that follows the church calendar. So I sit down and plug it in, and it's from the Gospel of Mark—the start of the Gospel of Mark. And in Mark 1 it says, “This is the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet”...what I had just been reading. And it goes on:

I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” — ³ “a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ [Mark 1:1-3]

And so John the Baptist appeared, and I sat there and said *okay God, you have my attention*...And the reason I am giving this little rabbit hole is that I want to make sure that you realize this just isn't out there, this is for you. The most important thing would be if you did not leave here thinking *Oh, what a good sermon*. The most important thing would be if you left here thinking *I need to read this for myself. I need to hear God speak to me*. And my experience yesterday in Starbucks reminded me that God will speak to you if you will listen to God through His word.

So, we want to talk about Isaiah at Advent because Christmas, more than you know, sounds like Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah is the prophet of hope and new beginnings. He talks about the birth of the king who would be called the “wonderful counselor” and the “prince of peace”. We talk about Isaiah at Christmas even when we don't realize it because we talk about the compassion of God. For the Old Testament writers, God was a God of creation, and covenant, and holiness, and wrath. And Isaiah is the one who starts to talk about a God of comfort and compassion and mercy, so that when Jesus came and talked about how he prayed to God, He said, “I say Daddy.” That's the spirit of Isaiah. Isaiah is the first one to say that the God of the Jews is also the God of all

the people of the world. Jesus brings the good news of God to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews, and that's Isaiah. Isaiah is a prophet before his time about justice and peace. The very first time that Jesus gets up to preach in the synagogue, they hand him the scroll of Isaiah and He said, "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, and to proclaim freedom for the captives." He's quoting Isaiah. We sing about Isaiah every day of Christmas. Whenever you sing a Christmas carol, it probably comes from Isaiah. They lived in a broken world and they longed for a better world, and we sing, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." We sing, "Lo, How a Rose E're Blooming", and Isaiah talked about how the desert itself would bloom. On Christmas Eve, we sing, "Silent night, holy night, love's pure light" because Isaiah said, "Those who walk in the darkness will see a great light." And next week we're going to sing "Joy to the World" because 600 years before Isaiah wrote, "The nations will sing for joy."

One of my professors wrote a commentary about Isaiah, and he said this: "Isaiah peered through the mist at the Assyrians and the Babylonian enemies, at corrupt politicians, and frilly liturgies. He looked at cowardly armies and greedy merchants and Isaiah was certain that he had spotted the approach of God's tomorrow. Isaiah spotted the approach of God's tomorrow and he used images that no one would forget."

I think now we are ready to read together the story of Isaiah. Please turn to Isaiah Chapter 12:

¹In that day you will say:

"I will praise you, LORD.

Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.

² Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and not be afraid.

The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation."

³ With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

⁴ In that day you will say: "Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things;
let this be known to all the world.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."

[Isaiah 12:1-6]

Now here is what I want you to do. If someone didn't already beat you to the punch, underline that phrase "In that day." If they did, circle it. It is there in verse 1 and again in verse 4. Prophets over and over talk about "on that day" or "the day of the Lord" or "the day will come" or what Isaiah is saying, "in that day." What they mean is *things look bad now, but on that day it will all be different*. They usually mean it one of three ways. Most prophets, most of the time, were talking about something that would happen soon. Like: *Things look bad for Israel now, but on that day it will change*. Soon. As a matter of fact, the idea was that if a prophet's prophecies did not come true, kill the prophet. So, most prophecies came true right away, and in Isaiah it says a new king will be born. Isaiah is probably talking about the son of the king of Israel. He's talking about the next king who will be Hezekiah, one of the great kings of Judah. But he is also—and this is sort of the second ring of the bell—talking far into the future: *Sometime way in the future a king will come and he will be much better*. And then the third ring of the bell is that the prophet looks to the end of the world. Some of it will come soon, some of it will come in the future, and some of it will come at the end of time. That is what has happened with this prophecy. Christians believe that. We believe that long ago God saved Israel. Long after that, God brought Jesus, and at the end of the day, the king will return. As a matter of fact, early Christians greeted each other just that way so that they would know who they were talking to—they weren't sure the other person they were talking to was a Christian, and so they figured out a sort of code. The first person would say, "Christ has died" and the response from the second person would be, "Christ has risen." Then together they would say, "Christ will come again." Soon, far off, end of the world...that's what "in that day" means, and the prophecy of Isaiah talks about all three of those things. That's about "in that day" but I think Isaiah also has something to say today. I think Isaiah has something to say to you today, and I think it is found in verse two. I'd like you to underline verse two of chapter 12 if you would. It says that God saves, and then it says, "I will trust and not be afraid." Underline "I will trust and not be afraid." Now I think that sometimes you read something that jumps off the page, and last month I was reading something from that Global Leadership Summit this summer and it said this: "Too many of us are not living our dreams because we are living our fears." Too many of you are not living your dreams because you are living your fears; you're letting your fears paralyze you. So I'd like to meddle. I'd like to get into your life for just the next couple of minutes. I think we are together in this. I'm like Mark Twain; I think you are a coward. Twain said, "The human race is a race of cowards. I know because I'm leading the parade, waving the flag." I know you are afraid because I am afraid too. So, here's what I'd like to do to meddle. In each of the pews there should be a basket and the basket should have cards in it, little white cards, and some pens. If you don't mind, pass it down. You may have to share the pens, but you aren't going to write a lot. Everybody take a card and write down on one side one thing that you are afraid of that not everybody is afraid of. I'm telling you right now, if my wife were in the room the word "mice" would be written down right now! Just take a second and write down what you are afraid of that not everybody is afraid of. Some of our fears are silly; some are good. It's a good

fear to be afraid of poisonous snakes, but there are also people who fear that every time they cough it could be cancer. They are called hypochondriacs; they are afraid. So what's a fear that you have that most people don't have? Do most of you have it written down? Okay, now turn to a person near you and ask them what they are afraid of that most people are not afraid of.

[John asks audience...]

What did you write down? "I'm afraid of not being good enough."

What did you write down? Nothing? You're afraid that you haven't written anything down!

What did you write down? "I'm afraid of letting down my family."

Anyone else have a fear? Dick, what did you write down? "I'm afraid of snakes."

My fear? I'm afraid, frankly, to get more than toe deep into the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea. And the reason for that is that at the absolute worst time in my life I saw a movie that traumatized me forever. And when we go someplace, I always say, "Honey, let's get a place that has a swimming pool because there are no sharks in swimming pools." I'm terrified of sharks. Now, I have to tell you that whatever you wrote down, too many of us are not living our dreams because we are living our fears, but it isn't my fear of sharks that is stopping me from living my dreams. It's something else, and for me at least, it changes. You are a bunch of cowards—I know it because I am too. Some of us are afraid to speak up. Some of us are afraid to take risks because we will get it wrong. Some of you are afraid to admit that you make mistakes because it will come back at you. Some of you are afraid to be generous because you're afraid you will run out of time or money. Some of you are afraid to start over. Some of you are afraid to reach out to that new person, even though it looks like they are alone. You're afraid to reach out. Some of us are afraid to ask for forgiveness. All of us, all of us are afraid of something. I found that out again yesterday. I am never going to go to Starbucks to finish my sermon again...never going to happen. Early yesterday morning, as I'm working on my sermon, I looked at my email. Big mistake—don't look at your email. One of my emails says, "Hey John, Here's an example of how our church is being divisive on political issues. Stop it." And I told my wife...*I'm not kidding you. You can't make this stuff up.* And within five minutes, a woman in our church comes up to me and says, "You don't know me, but I go to CPC. And pastor, I just want to tell you, I think we don't talk enough about this social issue. She talks about the social issue, and it's exactly the opposite of what this person is talking about. Now, can I tell you this? I'm not usually a fear-filled person, but these kinds of conversations put a pit in my stomach and my hands sweat and my mouth dries

out because I'm just so afraid I'm going to say something wrong. I'm afraid they are going to say, "If that's what people of God want, I'm not a people of God anymore." I don't want to do that to somebody, and besides, they might not like me afterwards, and that makes me afraid. Now, can I just go on here a second and say that I know that the person who wrote that email to me late on Saturday night was afraid to write that note to me, and he overcame his fear and he signed his name. So he and I are going to have a discussion. And this woman showed a ton of courage, coming up to the pastor of the church she doesn't know and saying *pastor, I think we are wrong here*. She overcame her fears, so we are going to have a conversation. We desperately need to be the kind of church that lives in attention and gets past our fears and learns how to respect and love one another with people who feel so differently. But I wanted to share with you that there's nothing like that knot in the stomach—that fear—to stop you from doing the thing that you would do if you didn't have fear.

So what I would like to do is to use the words of Isaiah. Isaiah's answer to fear is: I will trust Him and not be afraid. And offer you four of the same clues that I am using—I'm not there yet—to be less fearful. No, that's not right. I think we are always going to be fearful. There will always be things that make us afraid. What I need is to not let the fear stop me from doing the thing that I would do if I were fearless...if I really trusted in God. So here's what I would like you to do. Turn over that little white card and write down four words. I'm going to give you four words, and at the end I want you to circle one that if you weren't such a big coward, you would do between now and Christmas that would help you trust more and fear less. The first one that I see people of faith do—the thing I believe—is that **people trust God more when they remember the faithfulness of God**. Remembering the faithfulness of God is the biggest reason that we revolve this community around the scriptures. We believe the scriptures are the story of how God is faithful to people. We have just spent none weeks talking about how Moses was a schmuck just like us, but he staggered past his fears to follow God, and incredible things happened. We read the scriptures so we have hope in the Christ who is coming. One big reason for you to read the scriptures is so you would remember that God has been faithful; you're not the first one on this road. The second way I believe you can live beyond your fears is to **look for God at work in the witness of other people**. Last night I was talking here—smaller crowd—but I'm talking about this and I said, "I have to tell you how my faith has been strengthened so much by a friend of mine whose son died when he was only this high. And to watch this guy go through that and be humbled and hurt and closer to God, and to have God comfort him and draw him into a group of guys that he is walking with." I have learned that not *if* bad things happen, but *when* somebody says *Yep, it's cancer* or *No, you're not going to get your job back*, or *Yes, I'm leaving* or *Yes, he's going to die* that I need the community of people who have seen God at work. I believe that solitude turns you into a

coward. And walking through life with somebody who is not in your immediate family—can I just clarify that—somebody who is beyond your immediate family with whom you can share the worst and the best helps us to stay in faith together. The third thing that I would suggest, that Isaiah shows me, is that when I want to do the thing that I am afraid of, I'm better off trying not to jump to the end of the line. Instead I want to **ask God to show me a small thing**. Ask God/small. If I am going to forgive the unforgiveable, I'm not going to start by forgiving the unforgiveable. If I want to talk to a person about something I am terrified of talking about, I'm not going to start with that, so I should ask God to show me a small thing I can do in trust today. Maybe it's just to reach out. Maybe it's to serve in a small way. Maybe if you didn't have fears, maybe you would work for Habitat for Humanity. Maybe you would work in a homeless shelter. Just start with one night at Families Moving Forward. Start small. Maybe you should write a note or make a phone call. If you are like me, make the phone call in the middle of the night so you can leave a voicemail. It's a start. If you want to talk about forgiving somebody or being forgiven, maybe you just write a note that says: *This is complex, isn't it?* Start small, and I believe that if you ask God to help you, God will build trust muscles. God will build your trust muscles if you ask Him to show you a small thing to do instead of just being paralyzed with fear. This last one is directly out of the scriptures today. I would say that you will trust God more and fear people less if you will **sing the praises of God in the face of not feeling like it**. If you sing the praise of God daily in some way, especially this Christmas season, if you sing the praise of God, it is hard to be praising and terrified at the same moment, to be grateful and afraid in the same second. But you have to learn the music, and if you don't know the words that's okay. Hum along!

If you don't believe the words today because life is too tough, play the music on the radio and let it wash over you and hum along. Isaiah chapter 12 has been put to a song that we have been teaching in this church for almost thirty years. I have asked Rich and Matt if they would come and lead us in this child's song. I say it's a child's song because at the 9:30AM service about 100 of our children taught the congregation this song. They've been doing that for more than 25 years and I know that because my daughter is 31 and when she was five and in kindergarten, she taught us this song. I'm saying she taught us this song because she sang it every single night for 78 days. And I not only learned the song, I learned everything that Miss Hood said..."Dad, Heather said you don't say 'shirley'—that sounds like a girl's name—you say 'surely.'" And, "Everybody's voice stops towards the end of the song, so Heather taught us to say, 'I will not be afraid-DUH.'"

Henri Nouwen once said that we all have a choice about where we want to live. He said, "We will either live in the house of fear, or we will come home to the

house of love.” You are either going to choose to live in the house of fear and stay paralyzed, or this Christmas come home to the house of love. You cannot eliminate your fears, but you can come to believe that Jesus stands outside to meet you there. And if you are too afraid to come out, at Christmas Jesus will come in. If you invite Him, He will come in to your fears. Let’s sing this together. [Congregation sings the hymn “Surely it is God Who Saves Me.”]

So last night we did that, and after I went home I got a text from a friend who said *you may not remember, but it has been ten years now since our daughter Ellie died.* And as I sat there singing “Surely it is God Who Saves Me” I remembered that we decided to have people sing that at Ellie’s funeral because kids would be there. And I sang that song tonight and I was a little less afraid.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.