

First Sunday after Christmas – January 1, 2017
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Isaiah 63:7-9 (NIV)

I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us-- yes, the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. 8) He said, "Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me"; and so he became their Savior. 9) In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Dear Friends;

“So how was your Christmas?” That seemed to be the topic of conversation this past week whenever I had an opportunity to interact with people. It didn’t seem to matter if the individuals were children or senior citizens – all them were eager to talk about the joys of their Christmas celebrations.

Our text is a portion of a prayer that Isaiah addressed to the Lord. In this prayer, Isaiah eagerly longingly recalls all the wonderful things the Lord had done for his people – it’s like he’s making a list of all the gifts God had given to his people. I suppose we could call it a thank you list. Or you might call it an evidence list – evidence of the Lord’s kindness which would encourage Isaiah to call upon the Lord for his help in spite of the unworthiness of God’s people.

Like Isaiah of old we have many reasons to say, I will tell of the Kindness of the Lord. God has done many kind deeds for his people including you and me. Our text focuses our attention on those acts of kindness and reminds us why the Lord has blessed us in this way.

Isaiah had in mind the specific blessings the Lord showed to his people during the time of Moses – deeds like delivering them from their bondage in Egypt by sending the plagues and dividing the Red Sea so they could cross on dry ground and then drowning the Egyptian military in that same sea when they tried to follow. Those events were so awesome that Isaiah was still impressed several generations after they occurred. In fact, the history of God’s relationship with this nation was filled with remarkable actions. Think of how God enabled this nation to walk right into the land of Canaan by causing the walls of Jericho to come tumbling down. Think of how the Lord raised up judges like Gideon, Samson, and Samuel to deliver his people from the hand of their enemies and to turn them to the Lord when they wander away from him. And speaking of great rulers – what a blessing it must have been to live under God-fearing kings like David and Solomon. And think too, of the prophets – men like Elijah and Elisha whom God enabled to perform miraculous signs. Another deed of kindness that would have been on Isaiah’s mind was the promise of a return from captivity.

But most important of all was the promise made to their ancestor Abraham and passed down to David – the promise of a Savior. Isaiah’s book is filled with references to the promised Savior.

As Isaiah considered all these deeds of the Lord he knew they were more than simple acts of kindness – these were acts of compassion – done because of the Lord’s mercy and kindness. As an act of compassion for the fallen creation the Lord chose these people to play a special role in his plan of salvation. The Savior of the world would come from their nation. Isaiah talks of this Lord’s special relationship with these people in this way: **He said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not be false to me"; and so he became their Savior.**

When we consider the history of the nation of Israel we often look at it as the history of a people who were unfaithful to the Lord who chose them – think of how they turned away from him and worshipped a golden calf which they made with the plunder the Lord had given them when they left Egypt. Yet God called them to be faithful and true to him – establishing his covenant with them at Mount Sinai. But think of how often God had to discipline these people – allowing them to be carried off into exile and then providing a rescue for them. Isaiah was aware of these acts of unfaithfulness – he also look ahead to the crucifixion of the promised Savior – perhaps the ultimate act of unfaithfulness on the part of God’s chosen people. But in the midst of all this unfaithfulness the Holy Spirit worked through the promises of a Savior to lead many to follow God’s call, to remain faithful to him – and the Spirit does the same today among the Lord’s people – the Church of God. Isaiah is definitely thinking about the blessings the Lord has provided for the members of the Holy Christian Church.

God’s promise to his people – his Church included the promise that he would be their Savior – and the Lord kept that promise in so many ways – saving them with his acts of love and preservation as their wander in the wilderness for 40 years, often he saved his people of old from their enemies in the Land of promise. And of course he became their one great Savior when he sent his Son Jesus – the Savior of the world!

Everything that the Lord did for his OT people – he did with that great act of love in mind. And so even though all of the things we have been talking about occurred thousands of years ago in a distant land – none-the-less they are acts of kinds which God performed also with you and me in mind. And no doubt we can all recall personal examples of the Lord’s kindness to us from our own histories and lives. But the greatest act of his kindness toward us is that he has become our Savior.

Because we have been called by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel to be part of the Lord’s Church we are a people who will not be false to him. Yet we have a powerful sinful nature. We promise to remain faithful to our God and his word on our confirmation day. We desire to remain faithful to him and yet we often fall into sin. We are false to him. Yet Jesus paid for all those failures and all that falseness on the cross. He became our Savior. Our sins are covered by his righteousness. For Christ’s sake, we are counted as faithful in the eyes of our merciful Savior God who saved us from our distress. Isaiah tells us about our Savior God when he says: **In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.**

We have a God who is emotionally involved with us. He knows and feels our pain. And he has the solution for it. The Baby who came in the manger on Christmas is the solution. He came to feel the pain of our hardships, ultimately feeling the pain of nails in his hands and feet. He came to be tempted as are and yet he was without sin. He came to take our place under the curse of God’s law. He came to die the death we deserved. He became one of us – feeling the pain of hunger, sorrow at the death of his friend, the challenges of Satan’s temptations, the disappointment at being denied by those he love – he felt it all, he endured it all and he over came it all for us with his resurrection.

At times God even used angels to come to that aid of his people in their distress. Indeed it was the angels who had the privilege of announcing the wonderful birth of Christ as well as the resurrection of Christ and who told the disciples that Jesus would come again just as they had seen him go into heaven. As heavenly messengers the angels came with their messages of “fear not” to assure God’s people of his rescue and redemption.

Isaiah proclaimed: **In his love and mercy he redeemed them;** Isaiah describes the Lord as a redeemer – this was a word which had special meaning in Isaiah’s day – especially for a childless widow. The word described a close relative – a kinsman who would out of the goodness of his heart, step in and pay his own money to keep the property of a destitute relative in the family. In the familiar account of Ruth, Boaz served as a kinsman

redeemer – marrying Ruth and paying a price so that the property which rightly belonged to Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi might remain in the family.

God redeemed the Israelites. He would not let them live in slavery in Egypt. He repeatedly bought them back from the domination of their enemies. He rescued them often from slavery to their own sinful and idolatrous desires.

And this same God does the same thing with us. Christmas is a reminder of this. In our Epistle lesson for today the apostle Paul reminded us: God sent his Son, born of a woman to redeem those under the law. God redeemed us. He paid a price for us. He bought us back. He paid a price so that we might part of his household – part of the family of God. He did this when Jesus came as a baby to live and die in our place. That’s the price God paid for us: Jesus. Now we belong to God.

Because God owns us we are no longer owned by the Devil who would abuse us for all eternity. Because God owns we are no longer owned by ourselves – and that’s a good thing because our sinful nature would lead us straight to hell. What a blessing it is that God owns us – we are part of his family. God redeemed us that we might be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness.

Isaiah closed this text with a beautiful picture of the Lord’s kindnesses toward his people: **he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.** Parents can easily understand this picture. Your weary, tired, toddler comes to you with outstretched hands and says: “Mommy up.” “Daddy up.” The weary, tired parent picks the child up. The child fusses and squirms, maybe even cries for a bit. But soon the little body relaxes and the child falls fast asleep – safe and secure in the comfortable arms of a loving parent. What a pleasant picture – someone smaller and weaker being carried and lift up by someone bigger and stronger.

Now let’s put ourselves into that picture – picture God carrying us through our troubles, when we’re weary and tired. Picture yourself safe and secure in the comfortable arms of your loving heavenly Father for time and for eternity. It’s no wonder that Isaiah began our text with the words: **I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised,**

As Isaiah reminds us the Lord is worthy of our praise for the kind things he has done for his people. Together with Isaiah we have reasons to tell of the kindnesses of the Lord. Whom will we tell about these deeds? And why will we tell them?

Well first of all we’ll tell them to ourselves – when you read the Scriptures you discover that God’s people and prophets often consoled themselves in times of trouble by recalling past benefits...for their own consolation they always repeat the past blessings. And so there will be those times in our own lives when we are experiencing difficult times – just as the people were at the time Isaiah wrote this text. During those difficult and trying times it’s good to remember the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. It is better to think about the good and gracious things the Lord has done than to give in to the Devil’s temptations to despair.

But as Christians we’re not just concerned about ourselves. While we surely appreciate all that the Lord has done for us – we realize that his love extends to others and so we will sing his praises to others. We’ll console our fellow believers and offer them encouragement as we tell them of the kindnesses of the Lord reminding them to join us in praising the Lord for becoming our Savior and for saving us from our distress. But we won’t stop there – we’ll share the many good things God has done with those who do not yet know the wonderful redeeming love of the Lord. We’ll proclaim his saving acts to unbelievers so that we might lead them to know the great deeds that God has done for their salvation.

In other words, we'll preach the good news to all creation – the good news of the Christmas gift – the good news of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, the things he has done for us – the many things he has done for his people according to his compassion and many kindnesses.

And finally like Isaiah we'll recall all that the Lord has done as we join the heavenly host in praising and thanking God for all that he has done for us. Let's gladly join in telling of God's Kindnesses not just at Christmas but each and every day in the year ahead. Amen.