

Carol Service 2024

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Well, it's great to have something to celebrate, isn't it? I don't know what brought you here tonight, perhaps an invitation through your door and you just fancied something Christmassy to do. Perhaps it's tradition for you to come out at Christmastime to church. Perhaps it's the only time of year you find yourself in a church. If that's you, I'm delighted that you've chosen to come here tonight.

Some of you have got a really good friend who's brought you along. And for some of you, this is a normal Sunday. This is how you spend your Sunday night. But whenever we're here, I expect at some level we've come wanting something to celebrate.

Because sometimes, quite honestly, it doesn't seem that there is much to celebrate. The days are dark and short and still getting darker and shorter.

However, this time of year can be stressful and it can be sad. Perhaps there'll be seats around the table this year that are empty for any number of reasons.

[1 : 08] And even when we look beyond our own little world, we see a big world that is terribly broken. Do you know, here's a fun fact I learned this week.

Do you know, it's 40 years today, the 15th of December, that Band-Aid Christmas classic, Feed the World, was released in the UK. There's a world outside your window and it's a world of dread and fear.

It's a world outside your world outside your world outside your world outside your country. 40 years later, we wonder, what's changed? It was 12 years before that, that's right, 52 years ago, that John Lennon released the single, Happy Christmas, War is Over.

War is over if you want it. War is over now. Happy Christmas, happy Christmas, happy Christmas. Happy Christmas. As grating as that chorus is on our ears, it's even more grating on our hearts, isn't it? Because it's simply not true. War isn't over if we want it.

[2 : 16] Gaza, Lebanon, Ukraine, Myanmar, Yemen, Sudan, if we could wish these wars away, we would. There's a world we all want and quite honestly, this world isn't it.

Christmas, for most of us, is a time for pretending that the bad things don't happen. For a few weeks, we paper over the cracks, don't we, with tinsel and Christmas trees and mince pies and we grasp, don't we, for something to celebrate.

But friends, the carols that we've sung tonight, the readings that we've heard, they are not paper over the cracks, they're not a nice distraction, they're not wishful thinking.

What we've heard tonight gives us something to really sing for joy about in the face of a broken world. And especially that reading we just heard from a prophet in the Bible called Isaiah.

Yeah, they're words that were written about 700 years before Jesus was born. And they promise the world we all want. A world at peace because of the birth of a prince of peace.

[3 : 29] And tonight, I just want to take a few moments with you to help us see from that short reading that there really is something for us to celebrate at Christmastime, whoever we are.

Now, Isaiah never knew a Scottish winter, but he could very well be describing one, couldn't he, when he talks about the people walking in darkness?

It couldn't possibly be a Scottish winter, though, because he goes on to say that they have seen a great light. I'm told that one exists. I rarely see it. Now, what Isaiah is talking about is a deeper darkness than that, a spiritual darkness.

He's speaking about the distress of people who've given up hope in God and turned instead to hope in things that have let them down. Things were going very badly in Isaiah's day.

People were turning to pretty much anything to try to fix it. They made deals with other countries, but those deals were broken. They trusted in other gods, only to discover that those gods didn't

exist.

[4 : 34] They even started trying to talk to the dead to see if they could learn anything from beyond the grave, but none of it had helped. And in fact, it had only dug them deeper into the pit than they had begun.

And when they finally run out of options, then, says Isaiah, they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

He never knew a Scottish winter, but actually, Isaiah, I think, has put his finger on something that we do know well, the fear that hangs over us and the distress that grips our hearts, that sense of hopelessness.

As we look at a world that is terribly broken, but nothing seems to help. I don't know about you, but when war broke out again in the Middle East, I wondered, what would it take to bring it to an end? Not just this time, but for good. And not just there in that place, but across the world. What would it take to bring permanent peace?

[5 : 48] Where is the solution that we've been missing for the last 3,000 years, or from the dawn of humanity? What haven't we tried? Or perhaps more to the point, who haven't we turned to?

Now, that who is what the rest of Isaiah's prophecy is here to tell us about, because he says, on those living in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. It's like we've been living in an Arctic winter darkness for six long months.

But then you see the blazing sun edging over the horizon for the first time. Light shines in the darkness that we thought would never end. Not because they then, or we now, have found something else we can try, but because of what God does.

How many times have you personally made the sun rise? I trust, unless you're suffering delusions of grandeur, that the answer is no times. But this solution, it's like a sunrise.

We don't make it happen, but it changes everything for us. Because despite the people's stubborn refusal to trust him, God made a promise that there would be no more darkness for those who were in gloom.

[7 : 11] God promises he would lift the darkness and bring a lasting peace. And Isaiah tells us what that day would feel like. You increase their joy, he says.

They rejoice before you, as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. When was the last time you were that glad, that you rejoiced with joy?

You just imagine for a moment, standing beside the radio on the 8th of May, 1945, the day the Second World War ended in Europe. And hearing those words, the war is over.

You would cry. You would hug strangers. You would sing in the streets. It is that kind of ecstasy, that overjoyed celebration that God is promising.

He would shatter the unbreakable weight that was crushing them, the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of the oppressor. And here's the bit that gets me every time.

[8 : 22] I don't know about you. When he starts talking about the stuff of war, every warrior's boot used in battle, and every garment rolled in blood being thrown into the incinerator, being burned as fuel for the fire.

I visited the British Museum some years ago in London, and I remember being there, and there was an exhibition, and seeing this big, massive, tall statue, it's probably twice as big as me, made out of guns.

These guns had been collected in Central Africa by a peace organization. I couldn't tell you what the statue was of, just the experience of being confronted by the sheer number of guns.

And the plaque next to it said that this was only a small percentage of the number of guns that had been collected, and that that was only a small percentage of the number of guns still in use in that small part of the world.

Just imagine then what it would look like for every gun to be thrown on a scrap heap. Every tank rolled into a ditch and buried.

[9 : 39] Every bulletproof vest. Every boot used on the battlefield burned on a bonfire, not because we thought it would be a good idea or as a political stunt, but just because they were no longer needed.

Here are some ancient artifacts of a bygone age, the plaque would read. When people needed weapons and armor, because they used to fight each other.

However realistic you think that is, surely it's the world we all want. You'd have to be brave to argue we don't need a nuclear deterrent. But what if we really didn't need it?

Because there really was no more danger. What Isaiah is describing is not just restrained violence, but a world of lasting peace. Now, wouldn't that be something to celebrate?

A celebration that isn't just an escape from our big bad world, but instead a completely appropriate response to God's answer for the real world that we live in.

[10:45] But that's just wishful thinking. You say, we don't live in that world. So what is there for us to celebrate? Where is God's big fix? Can you point to it? Well, Isaiah says, you won't see it on your screens.

You won't hear about it in the news. You won't find it in the halls of power or on the battlefield. In fact, if you're looking out there for something big, he says, you're going to miss it.

Because God's big fix is in someone very, very small. For to us, a child is born.

To us, a son is given. And the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

The dawning light in a dark world, the solution that God gives for our broken world is a baby born to bring us peace.

[11:50] In the shadow of that towering pile of guns is a bundle of joy with the world we all really want on his shoulders. Three years ago, almost to the day, I came to our carol service straight from the hospital.

The next day, I went back with my wife, Susie, and we had our first baby, a little boy. It was a very, very surreal time. But you know, it would have been even more strange if when our baby was born, the midwife had handed him to us.

And instead of saying, here's your baby, she said, here's our baby. Or if our friends and family had shared the news, not about a baby boy born to Joe and Susie, but a baby boy born to us.

It would have been very weird. But that is exactly what Isaiah does. To us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. How can he say this baby is ours?

Well, because of who he is and what he came to do. This baby wouldn't be named after his parents, but would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[13:11] These are ways of speaking about God. See, the baby that Isaiah sees on the horizon is no ordinary baby. It's God himself stepping into our broken world some 700 years later in the person of his son, Jesus Christ.

Now, Isaiah didn't know his name. He didn't call him Jesus. But he uses a nickname earlier in his book, kind of a placeholder, Emmanuel, which means God with us.

You know, if we look around and we try to imagine the kind of God that is out there, well, probably we could say a God way up there who doesn't care.

If there is a God, well, how could he possibly be bothered if this is what his world has come to? But what over 2 billion Christians around the world will celebrate this Christmas is the wonderful news that God is not an absent father, leaving us to tear each other apart, but that he personally came down from heaven and entered into the brokenness and ruin of our world as a human being, as one of us.

He cares enough to have come and lived in a world we have ruined, and he did it to be our prince of peace. And, you know, I reckon whatever you think of Jesus, that anyone who claims that title deserves finding out a bit more about, is Jesus really a prince of peace?

[14:50] Can he really fix the world that we have broken? Isaiah tells us what to look out for. This baby would bring peace by becoming king and bringing God's good and loving rule into our world.

The government will be on his shoulders, he says. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom forever. Now, you won't see that if you read the news, but if you read the good news, one of the four gospels in the Bible, the histories of Jesus' life, you'll see that that is exactly what he did. When he spoke and taught people, they said, we've never heard someone speak with this authority. When he healed people of sickness, they said, we've never seen anything like this.

When he forgave people's sins, they said, who can forgive sins but God alone? He came and brought God's good and loving rule into the world in a way no one had seen before.

But the obvious question is, well, where is it all gone? Where is this king? Where is that kingdom now? Well, friends, keep reading the good news, and you'll see that we were so bent on destruction that we took him and nailed him to a cross.

[16:11] The prince of peace came, and we sent him to one of the most violent deaths that we could come up with. But, you know, this was his plan, that even through his death, he would bring us peace in a way we could never have imagined.

See, the Bible says that the reason that we have war with each other is ultimately because we have a much bigger war. The reason we are at war with each other is because we are at war with God. God created a very good world. He created us to be at peace with him, at peace with each other. But the moment human beings turned against God, well, we started to turn against each other too. Because we've rejected God's good rule over our lives, we destroy the lives of others, and we ruin his world. The word that the Bible uses for that is sin, and it tells us that the penalty for sin is death. But the reason these books are called Good News is because they tell us that when Jesus died, he did it not as a helpless victim of our sin, but on purpose to take the death that we deserve for our sin.

[17:29] And on the cross, Jesus served our sentence. He took our place and gave his life so that he could give us peace with God again. And remember, he is God with us.

So far from that distant, uncaring God that we imagine is there, the real God, the God of the Bible, handed himself over to die so that we who have turned against him could have peace with him again and be at peace with each other.

You know, it's really easy for us to look out there at the big bad world and say, how terrible it is that people do those sorts of things to each other. But, you know, just because we're not the ones firing guns at people doesn't mean that we don't hurt others or think badly of others or count others as our enemies, even in our hearts.

You just think of the times that you've got angry with people unfairly, maybe even on your way here, or said something or thought something about someone that you know would hurt them if they knew that you'd done that.

You don't need a gun in your hand to be at war. It's not just the big bad world out there that needs fixing, is it? It's the big bad heart in here.

[18:58] And that is what Jesus came to do for you. It's why he came to die, to turn our hearts from fighting against God to hoping in God. He is the Prince of Peace in a way that we weren't asking for and perhaps didn't even know that we needed, but that, friends, me and you desperately need.

And he came back from the dead and went into heaven to rule over his kingdom forever so that today the Prince of Peace is on the throne bringing peace to the world one heart at a time.

Just like the baby in the manger was too small for the world to take notice, so today the change that he brings will never be reported in the news, but we personally receive the gift, the free gift of peace with our Creator, and that peace begins to spill over into our relationships with everyone that we know so that peace begins to grow on earth, just like the angel sang that first Christmas, glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace to those with whom he is pleased.

And, friends, the Bible promises that one day that Prince of Peace will come again to end every war, to throw the blood-soaked stuff of war onto the fire and bring a never-ending peace for everyone whose hope is in him.

That is God's passion project, says Isaiah. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. So let me invite you tonight, if you haven't already, to personally receive that peace that Jesus freely offers you, peace with God through his death on the cross, and peace with all people under his risen, everlasting reign, simply by putting your hope and your trust in him.

[21:02] You wouldn't call yourself a Christian here tonight. Let me say again how glad we are that you're here, and I do hope that you have a wonderful Christmas, however you spend it. But above all, I pray that you would take hold of the Prince of Peace for yourself, and know him as your Savior and King, and know that joy that nothing in this world can take away, so that when Christmas is finished and the TV goes off and the decorations go away, you can still be celebrating something that does not go away.

the everlasting rule and reign of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. Let me invite you to celebrate beginning now as we stand to sing for our second to last carol tonight, words that reflect on what we've been thinking together about.

Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king, peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled. Do stand if you're able. Let's celebrate this wonderful good news together.

Thank you. Thank you.