

God's Grandeur

Isaiah 64:1-9

Understanding Christmas [Advent Series: First of Four]

Today we are embarking on a four-Sunday proclamation series that has the fundamental mission of truly understanding Christmas. The issue isn't so much what God did – we know what he did. He brought himself into the world. That's what we celebrate at Christmas. What I want us to do this year is ask ourselves the question, why did God do it? The easy answer is because God loves us. But there is much more to it than that. Why God incarnated himself as Jesus the Christ has as much to do with who God is as it does with whom we are. So, let's begin the journey to Bethlehem and understanding Christmas.

Before we can grasp anything about the Babe of Bethlehem, we first must be in tune with God's grandeur. This God of ours is the creator of all things on earth and in the cosmos. From the delicate balance of galaxies spinning in space to the intricate nature of the human body, all that we have is from the hand of the Creator. We ought to constantly be awed by the grandeur and glory of God.

How big is the universe anyway? Pretend the earth is a grape. In proportion, the sun would be the size of a beach ball and would be 163 yards away. Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system and would be the size of a grapefruit, and it would be five city blocks away. If all of that doesn't impress you, this will: our galaxy, the Milky Way, also reduced in proportionate size to our grape-sized earth, would be 55 billion miles wide! And God's universe is filled with other galaxies. Now that is grandeur!

I honestly don't know how anyone can look at all that is around, among, and within us and conclude that it is all happenstance, a mere accident. Sir Isaac Newton felt the same way. He had an exact replica of our solar system made in miniature. At its center was a large golden ball representing the sun. Revolving around it were smaller spheres attached at the ends of rods of varying lengths representing Earth and the other planets. All of it was geared by cogs and belts to make them move around the sun in perfect harmony.

One day Newton was studying his model when a friend, who did not hold much stock in the Bible of religion, stopped by for a visit. Marveling at the device and watching Newton make the heavenly bodies move in their orbits, the visitor exclaimed, "Why Newton, what an exquisite thing! Who made it for you?" Without looking up, Sir Isaac replied, "Nobody!" "Nobody?" echoed his friend. "That's right," Newton said, "nobody. All of these balls and cogs and belts and gears just happened to come together, and wonder of wonders, just by chance they began revolving in their set orbits with perfect timing."

The first verse of our passage from Isaiah 64 this morning intones, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." God created and then came down to place us into his creation to be his witnesses and extollers of his grandeur, and then to be stewards of all that he gave to us. We can look up at the night sky and shake our heads in utter amazement. We can watch a caterpillar emerge from its cocoon as a beautiful butterfly and also feel God's grandeur. Our God is an awesome God. Before we can begin to understand the coming into the world of God's only begotten Son, we must first absorb, acknowledge, and appreciate God's grandeur.

This chapter from Isaiah is a grand chapter, for it speaks of the grandeur of God. It also speaks of our sin. Verse six says, "We have all become like one who is unclean." The Hebrew word here for "unclean" is *tawmay*. It means defilement. It is the strongest word Isaiah could use to describe the people's condition. The Old Testament makes a clear distinction between those who are unclean and clean. In Leviticus 13:45 lepers are commanded to walk around crying out, "Unclean; Unclean" as a warning to others to stay away so as not to become infected and spread the disease. But here Isaiah is saying there is not any distinction between clean and unclean. All are unclean because all are one in sin.

There is not a community of clean and whole people with a few unclean ones to be ostracized. All are unclean. All are defiled. Isaiah acknowledges before God that all deserve to be avoided and dealt with without mercy.

But then Isaiah turns back and calls on God's grandeur in verse eight: "Yet, O lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." Yes, we are a crucially important part of God's grand plan. We are part of his creation. Isaiah then pleads with God on behalf of all the people, asking God to not remember their inequities, and he reminds God that we are indeed of his creative hand.

Isaiah calls upon the God of all creation to preserve that very creation. The God who can tear open the heavens and come down to make the mountains shake – this God of grandeur can preserve his own people in awesome ways. This God, who molds his people as a potter molds his clay, can tear open the heavens again and save the people from their sin. And how did God choose to do this grand thing, to save you and me from our sin? God gave up his grandeur and became incarnate as a tiny, fragile baby in a non-descript little town in Judea called Bethlehem. That baby came to show us the way to a grand life, a life lived in Christ, a life lived in hope, and a life lived in the promise of eternal life.

Christmas is celebrated in so many different ways around the world. Many do not have any idea of why we even have Christmas. To some it is a great opportunity to make lots of money selling products. To some it is the time of year when we express our love to those closest to us by giving them expensive gifts. To some it is the singing of familiar carols, while not really listening to the words themselves. We know why we have Christmas. It is because we are sinners and we cannot save ourselves. Christmas comes to remind us that we have a God who cares about that which he created – namely, us! And he cares for us so much that he tore the heavens apart on a star-lit night some 2,000 years ago and presented himself to us and asked us to fall in love with a baby, then the Son. Thirty-three years later, God tore open the heavens again, tore the temple curtain in two, and raised that baby, now the Christ, to eternal glory. And he did it all for us!

When we first understand the magnificent and awesome grandeur of God, and we admit our own frailty and sins, only then can we begin to truly understand Christmas. The journey to Bethlehem continues anew, my friends. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 27 November 2011
[First Sunday of Advent]