

In tonight's Call to Worship the prophet Isaiah made this statement of God: *The Lord says to His Messiah, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

Those of us who have been here each Sunday during the Advent season saw how Isaiah's prophecies were fulfilled by God in the most amazing detail. The birth of Jesus confirms God's plans to save us, and builds our faith when we realize that what was written long ago has indeed happened. But what is this salvation that God has in mind? Just how does the birth of a little baby in a certain time and place make the world right again, especially today?

A number of years ago my husband and I traveled to China. On Sunday morning our friends took us to a worship service in an international church, which met in a ballroom of a hotel. There were guards at the door. You had to show your passport to get in. Once inside, we entered a room that held around 2,500 people. Soon the auditorium filled and the service began. We rose and sang a song, *There is a Redeemer*, each verse in a different language, English, then Swahili, then French. As I stood there halfway around the world with people from all different nations, tears flooded my eyes. Instantly I felt the power of a faith that unites, as we worshiped this One who came as a baby long ago, in a certain time and place.

Then, as we traveled through China, I met citizen after citizen who believed in Jesus, at considerable personal sacrifice. And they were equally as encouraged to meet us; believers from so far away. I thought of the hard road traveled by courageous people long ago who brought the good news to China, most of them compelled despite great odds, to carry the message of good tidings for all people.

Since our visit, that international church has grown so large it divided into five different congregations. It's been shut down by the government at various times, but reopened. And when it reopened last spring, it again doubled within two months.

How did that happen?

It's the power of God to bring Good News.

And, eventually, Isaiah tells us, Kings will stand at attention when God's Messiah passes by, and princes will bow low, because of the Lord, who is faithful. For God said through Isaiah, "My salvation shall redeem people from every tribe and tongue and nation."

But how can that be? That speaks of great power, and on this night so many years ago it was only a simple young maiden, Mary, who said "yes" to God. She had to say yes for it to happen. God never forces you or anyone. But even though it would be really hard for her, something compelled her to look up to God and say, 'I'll do it. Let it be done to me as you say.'

Then, her fiancé Joseph said "yes," at great cost to himself. Those two, Mary and Joseph, were the only ones who knew – and how much did they know? Not much. They each connected with God and said "yes." When they said yes it changed their lives forever.

Now at first, there was lots of opposition. The movie, "The Nativity Story," puts some thought into how it might have been. They experienced prejudice, judgment, and danger. Yet their "yes" despite all that enabled the act of God.

Later Jesus' disciples, one by one, would say "yes" to God, with one saying "no." With sacrifice and determination those eleven compellingly brought good tidings, and small churches began to pop up here and there. The church was often crushed down by their enemies but not extinguished, and the message continued to spread.

Sometimes we think, the church is weak; its members are sinful. But as one life after another is touched, that life makes the difference, and the voice of God speaks, drawing every culture and nation in many different ways.

Once, Martin Luther was out walking on Christmas Eve around 1500 A.D. He struggled to live a holy life, but failed miserably. He almost became mentally ill thinking he could never please God, until he began reading the Bible and made the amazing discovery that we relate to God by faith. So as he walked through a snow-covered forest that night, he was enamored by the beautiful evergreens shimmering in the moonlight. Legend has it that he cut a little fir tree, set it up at home, and decorated it with candles, in honor of Christ's birth.

One little tree on a quiet Christmas Eve, and how many Christmas trees do you see today? Simply because one man, a man who felt great personal failure, said "yes" to God, and God's powerful message of salvation began flowing to every nation.

Here's the Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square. It has been placed there every year since 1947 by the people of Norway, in gratitude for Britain's aid during World War II.

Likewise, evergreen wreaths symbolize eternal life through Jesus Christ. A man named Merrill Worcester, owner of the Worcester Wreath Co. of Harrington, Maine, places 16,000 wreaths every year at Arlington National Cemetery to signify eternal life for the sacrifices made by US soldiers. He began in 1992, when he visited the cemetery and the immense sacrifice was impressed on him. Each year he provides the wreaths, trucks them, and brings volunteers to place them.

Why?

The power of God to spread the good news of salvation.

Ever eat a candy cane at Christmastime? An Indiana candy maker wanted to make a candy that symbolized the story of Jesus Christ. He began with white to symbolize the virgin birth and sinless nature of Jesus. The hardness of the cane stands for Christ the solid rock and the firmness of God's promises. The "J" shape stands for Jesus, and the crook of the shepherd's hook. Then, he added red stripes, three small for the scourging and one large for the cross to stand for the promise given of eternal life.

Just a simple piece of candy designed by one man of faith has spread throughout the world. That's the power of God spreading the good news of salvation.

Shall we talk about Santa Claus? Why does he give those presents anyway? Santa Claus supposedly only gives to “good little boys and girls” not naughty ones, but that never seems to be a factor on Christmas morning. Santa is built on the life and work of an ancient bishop, one believer who sacrificed his personal wealth to give children gifts because of Jesus Christ. He has inspired you to give gifts, too.

And what about music? Every Christmas song points us to the story of Christ, telling the good news in some way. *We wish you a Merry Christmas, we wish you a Merry Christmas, we wish you a Merry Christmas and a happy new year. Good tidings we bring to you and your kin. Good tidings of a Christmas and a happy new year.*

No matter how secular the world might become, God’s power continues to permeate the world with the message of salvation, through us.

Someone asked me, how do I live the Christian life, because I have failed over and over again.

To be a Christian, what begins with a simple “yes,” is not an easy task.

There is some cost for being a Christian; a sacrifice, sometimes even to death. People will ridicule you because you believe; people will mock your morals as meaningless. People will even curse God to your face.

But God will love you.

You will struggle with sin and at times think there’s no way you can overcome it. But God will forgive you again and again if you turn to Him and ask.

Sometimes tragedy will happen and you will wonder why, with no perceived answer at times. But the truth is, there is an ultimate answer and that’s what matters. The truth is, our world is filled with darkness and temptation and unbelief. That’s the world God has entered through that little baby, born in Bethlehem at just the right time.

In and through Christ Jesus, you experience the love and presence and power of God. You are given great hope and very good news. All you have to do is say yes.

So a commitment here, a commitment there, one at a time soon blossoms into a message that reaches the far ends of the world – to every tongue and tribe and nation. It’s a beautiful message.

It’s unstoppable. Why?

For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). That’s the best news and it’s for the whole world. Have you said yes?

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Isaiah 60:1). AMEN