

Isaiah 63:7–9

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> He said, “Surely they are my people,  
children who will be true to me”;  
and so he became their Savior.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

### **God is Present with his People**

It's always exciting at the end of the year to look ahead to the new year. It's exciting to look ahead to our plans for 2023, new opportunities that might be waiting for us, new goals to achieve, places to go, a new routine to start. As exciting as that is, the end of a year is also a good time to look behind us at the year gone by. As we reminisce on the past year or years, there's probably a mix of both positive and negative memories. But either way, research has shown that there are many benefits of remembering the past. For example, remembering problems we've faced in the past helps us solve current problems. Remembering the past supposedly helps us solidify our identity by reminding us of who we are and what our values are. It's said that remembering the past helps us form relationships as we discover shared experiences with people. Remembering the past is even said to help regulate our emotions by improving our mood and mental health. Whether or not you have found any of those things to be true, what probably is true for you is that remembering the past is an enjoyable way to think about the blessings in your life.

Our sermon reading today comes from a prayer spoken by the prophet Isaiah, who is reminiscing on Israel's past. As he does, he remembers both good things and negative things, but in his prayer he especially shows us how through everything, **God is present with his people.**

In the first part of the prayer, the first verse of our text, Isaiah remembered God's acts of kindness: *“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.”* I imagine that Isaiah may have had in mind how God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt. How, when all seemed hopeless, as they were pinned in by Pharaoh's army on one side and the Red Sea on the other, God opened the sea and delivered them. God himself told his people *“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and*

*brought you to myself* (Ex 19:4). Isaiah would have known how the Lord never left Israel's side: *"<sup>21</sup>By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night"* (Ex 13:21). Isaiah may have had in mind how God was present with his people through worship in the tabernacle. Isaiah may have remembered how God provided for his people during their years in the wilderness: God said, *"During the forty years that I led you through the wilderness, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet"* (Deut 29:5).

As nice as it would have been for Isaiah to remember these things from Israel's past, it wasn't all positive memories. Later in this same prayer, Isaiah had to plead with God for mercy for his people. Why? Isaiah was painfully aware of how Israel had broken God's covenant over and over. God had called Israel to be his special people, a holy nation. But a quick look through the first several books of the Old Testament show us plenty of times God's people were *unfaithful* to their God. As Isaiah looked to the past he remembered how Israel liked to take matters into their own hands. They fashioned a golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai, because they doubted that God was really present with them. They rebelled and complained on their way to the Promised Land, and once in the Promised Land they started following the pagan nations around them. In the time of the judges they abandoned the true God over and over in favor of false gods. In Isaiah's day they continued to forsake the ways of their God.

So in a part of his prayer after our text, Isaiah pleads for God's mercy: *"Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins forever"* (64:9). Isaiah pleaded that the Lord would draw near with his mercy and forgiveness.

Though we are far-removed from the historical time and place of the Israelites, this prayer is written for us as well. The end of each calendar year gives us a chance to remember the past, to think about the past 12 months and appreciate God's kindness and presence. We get to pause and think about all God brought into our lives in the last year - whether it was new jobs, new friends, new relationships, an engagement, a marriage, a birth, or any blessing in between.

But what will also come to mind at the end of a year are memories of failures, memories of things we regret. We'll think of ways we fell short in our relationship with family and friends. We think of times we let anger or greed get the best of us. Times that we were not faithful to our Father, as he has asked us to be.

As you think about the past year, you may also remember times when your sinful nature second-guessed God's presence, much like the Israelites in the desert: times where you thought, "God, where are you now?" "God, don't you see what I'm going through?" "Can't you help me now, God?" In times like these we're tempted to think that God is actually far away. Or, maybe you remember times your sinful nature even resented the presence of God, because you know he saw each sinful action, heard each shameful word and each shameful thought. Or perhaps you resented God's presence because he knew he was there and yet didn't fix things the way you had hoped.

In all these things, we're forced to admit that, like the Israelites thousands of years before us, we've failed to live as the true people of God. The fact is, our sins should be pushing God farther and farther away from us, until his presence is completely removed from us.

But another thing Isaiah's prayer does is highlight God's faithfulness. The second verse of our reading: <sup>8</sup> *[God] said, "Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me"; and so he became their Savior.* What would ever lead God to look at Israel, or at us today, and still say, "Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me"? That can only be said because of God's true and faithful Son, Jesus. Isaiah, who wrote around 700 B.C., had knowledge of this Savior. As we sang during Advent, "Isaiah had foretold it...": He prophesied to the wicked king Ahaz, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Is 7:14). Isaiah believed that his God of presence would one day be present with his people in a very special way. Isaiah had faith in *Immanuel*, the God who is *with us*. As we heard in the 2nd reading this morning, when the fullness of time had come, God did send his Son to be born of the woman. God cared for his children so much that he became our Savior, born under the law, to redeem us and make us God's sons and daughters.

Isaiah's prayer helps us 21st century Christians to remember the past and trace God's presence across history. We trace his presence through the history of Israel, through Egypt, through the wilderness, and even through the Babylonian exile. We traced his presence to the manger in Bethlehem, where God made his dwelling among us. And now we can trace his presence up to our own lives today.

We might say that New Years is best observed in light of Christmas, as we celebrate the birth of God's Son into our lives. At the end of the year, we remember the past and all that God has done for us, but we may also be consumed by whatever challenges we see facing us in 2023. This is when it's good to remember that as God was continually present with his Old Testament people, and as he came to dwell with his people on that first Christmas, he continues to be present with us as the days and years go on.

In the 3rd and final verse of our reading, Isaiah's prayer reminds us that God is directly involved in our problems. He wrote, "In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them." God does not disappear when we need him. Across Scripture we see God saving his people, whether directly or through his angels. Either way, it's his presence that saves. We see how God felt the distress of the Israelites when they were in Egypt: "The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. <sup>24</sup>God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. <sup>25</sup>So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them" (Ex 2:23-25).

It's the same God who was concerned when he saw a world of people who were lost. So he sent Jesus to share in our humanity. Jesus takes that truth—the truth that God is present with us in our suffering—Jesus took it to the extreme when he stepped in to join lowly sinners on a sin-filled planet. And he didn't stop there, but he, God incarnate, bled and died with the weight of

the world's sin on his shoulders. What could better demonstrate to us that our God is present with us?

What a blessing it is that God has given us his continual presence also in his Word and Sacrament. We get to witness even today Jesus' true body and blood in his Supper, given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. As you leave today and enter the new year, be confident in God's presence. Be confident in the fact that God is not unmoved by what happens to his people. The final words of our reading said, "*In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.*" It's the same God who is concerned about you. Whatever pain you have right now, God feels it. Whatever apprehensions about the year to come are on your mind, they're on God's mind too. Whatever is a concern to you is a concern to God.

When we needed him most, God stepped in and provided redemption through his Son. You can enter every New Year with the confidence that no matter the bumps in the road, whatever unexpected hardship comes your way, God will be present with you year after year, until ultimately he will draw near to you in the best way possible, by bringing you to himself in heaven. What do we do until that time? What else could we do but exactly what Isaiah wrote? "*I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised.*" We get to tell people what our God has done for us. That's our mission as a church, that more and more may rejoice in the blessings of an ever-present and gracious God. Go and enter this New Year confident of the presence of your God. Amen.