

Incense: God is With Us
Gifts of Christmas
Isaiah 7
12/10/23

Introduction

- **Holiday Schedule**
- **Matthew 1 + Isaiah 7**
- **Warning – Just like last week, gotta do a lot of Bible work, but I promise the pay off is coming, ok?**
- **Pray**

We are continuing our advent series this morning exploring together the deeper meaning behind the gifts given by the Wise Men/Magi to Jesus in Matthew 2 – the gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh.

And we said last week, but I think it bears repeating – that we aren't making this stuff up out of thin air.

- First, we said that the early church has been seeing these beautiful realities about the gifts for quite some time. Last week I shared a quote from Irenaeus in 150 AD. Check this out from Origen about 100 or so years after that, writing in 248 AD in his work *Contra Celsum* he says – **“They came, accordingly, to Judea...bringing gifts... gold, as to a king; myrrh, as to one who was mortal; and incense, as to a God; and they brought these offerings after they had learned the place of His birth.”**
- Secondly, we also said that in order to see the beauty of these gifts, we have to understand a little bit more about the book of Matthew. Matthew has an agenda. He's writing from a Jewish mindset to a predominantly Jewish audience, and one of his primary goals is to help them see that Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is in fact the long-awaited Messiah who has come to usher in God's Kingdom.
 - So Matthew is constantly drawing all of these parallels throughout his book back into the broader story of the Old Testament to help the reader understand – this is the Messiah. This is the Christ. The one for which we have been waiting and longing and hoping.
 - And that is true even in the gifts Matthew says the wise men bring to this child in Bethlehem. They point to this boy being the culmination of all of God's promises in Genesis through Malachi.
- **Last week – Gold: Jesus is the promised Shepherd-King from Bethlehem.**
 - Micah 5 predicted, the king would come and:
 - Defeat the enemy
 - Bring God's people back to Himself
 - Make all things right and new

Frankincense

This week let's talk about **gift #2 – frankincense.**

Just for a little bit of background, frankincense comes from the resin of a particular type of tree, the Boswellia tree, located in the Arabian Peninsula. **It looks something like this...**

A cut is made in the bark of the tree, then the resin seeps out and forms a hard lump. And when that lump is burned it has a strong and pleasant aroma.



Now, in today's world it's not hard to get a hold of frankincense. You can get a bottle off Amazon for like \$10-15. It's really popular (I'm told, no personal experience) in the essential oil community, often believed to reduce stress and help boost your immune system and heal wounds.

But back in the time of Jesus, it was very expensive and extremely hard to get.

So expensive, in fact, that it was reserved almost exclusively for use within temples as a part of the offerings and sacrifices to deities, to gods.

You can find a ton of historical writings on this from both the Egyptians and the Romans. About the use of frankincense in temple worship to their false gods and how frankincense plays a prominent and exclusive role in those temple settings.

Old Testament Worship + The Presence of God

And that was actually true in the worship of God's people in the Old Testament as well. Frankincense was reserved for use in the tabernacle and temple.

- The Tabernacle, if you're not familiar, was the mobile tent that the Israelites constructed in the book of Exodus that was their place of worship. It was where the priests would go to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the sins of the people.
- It was later replaced once by the permanent structure of the temple, first built by Solomon in Jerusalem for the very same purposes – it's where the priests would go to offer sacrifices for God's people.

Frankincense was a part of that worship system.

BUT it had a specific purpose for being there...

- You can read about this later if you'd like in **Exodus 30** and **Leviticus 2**.
- When a priest would enter into the room designated for sacrifices in the tabernacle and then later the temple, they were instructed by God to burn frankincense.
- And this was not some empty religious ritual.
- The purpose was that as the smoke and the smell from the frankincense filled the room it was to be a reminder to the priest – *God is present. God is here. God has come.*

In the words of God himself in **Exodus 30:26** – **You shall beat some of [the frankincense] very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you.**

In other words – Frankincense points to the presence of God.

Immanuel

Now, stick with me...remember how Matthew works. He's using the gifts to say something about Jesus by drawing connections to other parts of the story and then back into the Old Testament. So when he highlights – one of the gifts is frankincense – what he's alerting his Jewish audience to is – ding, ding, ding – **this child is God with us.**

Which, he already made sure they knew back in chapter 1. So hop up there with me, **Matthew 1:18**...

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying,

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

So notice – the birth of Jesus Christ. A baby born of a virgin. God taking on flesh – this is the fulfillment of what God said through the prophet Isaiah, which is this, v23...

23 “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

Once again, Matthew is using a prophecy from the Old Testament (Isaiah 7:14) to shed light on the meaning of this miraculous birth.

Isaiah 7

And once again, his audience would not just have thought back to Isaiah 7:14, but to all of Isaiah 7, and all of the book of Isaiah, and all of the surrounding story that is taking place.

So let's hop back to Isaiah 7. What is going on in this chapter? What is it about?

Here's the 30,000 ft flyover:

- 700 or so years before the birth of Jesus (right before what was taking in place in Micah last week), a King by the name of Ahaz is ruling over Judah.
- So at this point, God's people have been divided into two kingdoms – the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.
- Ahaz is ruling over Judah.
- And during his reign he hears rumors that Syria and Israel are coming to attack him.
 - And rightly so – he's afraid.
 - Isaiah 7:2 says his heart was shaking as trees shake in strong winds.
 - He's nervous.

And so you would think – ok here's the king of God's people. He's in the lineage of David, a man after God's own heart. Surely he's going to turn to God for help. Surely we're about to see this wonderful heartfelt Psalm-like prayer, and God's gonna rise up and deliver him, it's gonna be awesome.

But that's not what happens at all. Instead Ahaz turns to Assyria, a different nation, for help instead. In fact, he goes and gets gold from the temple (what was given for the worship of God) and gives it as a gift to the king of Assyria to basically sweeten the plea deal.

Instead of going to God in his time of trouble, Ahaz looks elsewhere for hope and salvation. And yet watch what God does...look at verse 3...

Isaiah 7:3-9

3 And the Lord said to Isaiah, “Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear-jashub your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field. 4 And say to him, ‘Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah. 5 Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, 6 “Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel as king in the midst of it,”

7 thus says the Lord God: 'It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. 8 For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. 9 And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.'"

God sends Isaiah his prophet to tell Ahaz – don't be afraid. Stand firm in your faith. I've got you. This is not going to work. Trust me. I will protect you, if you will remain firm in your faith in me.

If you read this story in 2 Kings 16, you'll see Ahaz doesn't listen. Doesn't really care. Doesn't seem interested in Isaiah or God. So God says this in v10...

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: 11 "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." 13 And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

In other words, God says to Ahaz – "Do you want to know why you shouldn't look elsewhere to help in your time of need? Do you want to know why you can trust me? Do you want a sign that God is with you in your temptation, suffering, and pain?"

Here's how you know. Here's the sign I will give to you – **A virgin will give birth to a son, who will be called Immanuel – God with us.**

So here we are, 700 years later. And Matthew says – "Don't you see it? God has made good on his promise. A virgin named Mary has given birth to a child, who is the Immanuel: God with us.

He has entered into humanity. Taken on flesh. Born of a woman. Fully God has become fully man. And come into our world to be with us, and rescue us. To break the power of sin and death. To set the captive free.

Advent shouts across all of history – God with us. Immanuel.

The Beauty of Immanuel

Let's just sit for a minute and think about how incredible this is. Think about how ridiculous the incarnation truly is. God took on flesh.

- **Think about the wonder of condescension.**

- That God who made all things, who created all things for His glory. Who holds all things together. Who existed from before time began with no beginning and who has no end. Who is infinite (no limits) and transcendent (no boundaries) would take on flesh.
- A body. With no sin, but with weakness. The frailty of a child. Would stoop to the level of flesh and blood.
- What kind of God does that? No other god in the religions of the world stoops in this way. It is a beautiful reality of our one true God.

- **Think about the awesomeness of God's power.**

- How awesome and powerful must God be that he could create and fashion together a body that could sustain the indwelling of the triune God.
- Jesus doesn't cease to be God. He doesn't give up his divinity. He doesn't become half-god and half-man. Fully God comes to dwell in fully man.

- Takes on a body like our own – with nerves and muscles and bones and organs.
- Yet holding the divinity of Christ at the same time.
- **Think about the magnificence of grace.**
 - Humanity does not deserve “God with us.”
 - You read through the Old Testament and one of the things that will just become abundantly clear is how messed up humans are and how patient God is.
 - People want to point to the OT and say it shows a cruel God...but have you read it? Because it's abundantly more apparent how cruel humanity is. Genesis to Malachi we're killing each other, waging war against one another...lying, deceiving, cheating, stealing, hurting, and abusing.
 - And yet time and time again God is patient. He pursues His people.
 - ***And in an unfathomable act of magnificent grace, God comes to be with us.***
 - Which means what? How deeply does he love and care for humanity...
 - As Charles Spurgeon would say – “God cannot mean to destroy that race which he thus weds unto himself.”
 - That Jesus coming down from heaven, entering into the human experience, is the pledge that God is going to redeem what is broken. That Jesus coming down, promises he will also take his people up to heaven, his taking our nature is the seal of our being lifted up to his throne.

Application

That's the wonder of the incarnation. That's the hope of Advent – That God has come to be with us. Frankincense – a little gift of spice pointing us to this great reality – God has not left us on our own.

And here's why this matters for us today...

Because there's a little bit of King Ahaz in all of us.

Times have changed, but the human heart has not.

- When the rubber hits the road in our lives.
- When we're pressed and feeling crushed, overwhelmed, hopeless.
- When we're facing temptation
- When we're facing the struggles and pains of our lives...
- ***How often is God our last resort?***
- ***How often do we turn to anything and anyone and anywhere else to find our hope and salvation but God.***

Think about all of our Assyrians that we turn to for help in time of need.

I know what will help me...

- A Relationship.
- Medication.
- Counseling.
- A new career.
- A new coping strategy.
- Will power and discipline.
- Christmas carols and Christmas cookies.

But advent shouts across history – THERE IS A BETTER HOPE!

Just like King Ahaz... Just like the Israelites in Matthew 1+2... God comes to us, even when we're looking in every other direction for salvation. And offers us Himself. Immanuel. God with us.

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas. I love Christmas music. I really do. My personal favorite album is Michael Buble's Christmas Album. 12 years later, still wonderful. And my favorite song on that album is his version of the classic "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

And as I was thinking about this message and Matthew and Isaiah and God as Immanuel, the lyrics have kept coming back to my mind. Here's the first 2 verses...

Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Let your heart be light
From now on
Our troubles will be out of sight

Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Make the Yule-tide gay
From now on
Our troubles will be miles away

And while I love that song, I can't help but think about just how untrue it is...

I know how I'm told Christmas is supposed to make me feel. The lights, the treats, carols on the radio. It's supposed to be the most wonderful time of year. This special season where our problems just get put to the side and all of our loved ones are gathered around and it's nothing but merriment and joy.

And sometimes it is that, maybe for you this year it is, and praise God for that... but can we just acknowledge the reality that a lot of years, or maybe this year for someone you love, or maybe this year for you it's... just... not.

- Maybe the Christmas season for you is accompanied by sadness and pain.
- Maybe it brings up feelings of loneliness or loss...
- Maybe this is the year when there's an empty seat at the table that didn't used to be there...A voice missing from all the excitement of opening gifts.
- Maybe it's just carrying all the pressure of life – I'm not worried about Christmas...
 - I'm worried about paying bills
 - I'm worried about my marriage which is falling apart
 - I'm worried about my career
 - I'm worried about my kids
 - I'm worried about my health

The reality for many of us, despite what the songs on the radio say, Christmas can be more of a reminder that life hasn't turned out how you hoped it would more than anything else... it's far more monotonous, lonely or painful... or there's a lot more sin and struggle that you thought would be there...

And like King Ahaz and the Israelites you're asking – **"Where can I turn for help?"**

And if that's where you find yourself, I have good news – God has already answered the question in the birth of Christ. Turn to me. I am with you.

**Because advent isn't the good news that all your troubles will be miles away...sorry Mr. Buble...
Advent is the good news that Jesus Christ is Immanuel...God with us in our troubles.**

Because the good news of Advent is not just that God came to us... but rather, the good news of Advent is God is with us. That's what Immanuel means - God with us.

Because yes Jesus came. Born in a manger in Bethlehem. But eventually, if you keep reading the story...he leaves. He dies, He rises again, He goes to the right hand of the father where right now He is ruling and reigning and interceding/praying on our behalf.

But the "God with us" part of the story didn't end in Acts 1 when Jesus ascended into heaven. Instead he sends the Holy Spirit to indwell, to live in, all who trust in Christ for salvation.

If you're a Christian, God is not just **with you**, he's **in you**.

- Empowering you to fight against sin.
- Giving you supernatural peace that makes you able to rejoice in all circumstances.
- Guarding you against lies and accusations of the devil.
- Sealing you as a guarantee that one day you will be with God in eternity.

My troubles aren't miles away! My troubles are right here...

- In my emotional, physical, spiritual, mental unhealth...
- In my sin struggles and addictions...
- In my family, in my friendships...
- In my finances...

***But I don't have to run around looking for a bunch of functional saviors...
Because you know who else is her? God. God with us. Immanuel.***

That is our hope in advent.

- **Gold – a king is born today.**
- **Incense – God is with us.**

So we wait on him...firm in our faith. Trusting that He has come. He is here with us now. And He will come again.

Pray.