

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

TESTIFY TO UNFAILING LOVE

Today we end a worship series called *Testify to Love*, and next week begins a new year. And end and a beginning, and to give you sort of a trailer for what's to come, I want to make this big book that we call the Bible something that makes sense to people, because I think that most of your experience with the book has been very indirect and very hodgepodge. If your experience with it is limited to what you hear when you attend church, which is little snippets like you got today – a reading from the Old Testament, a reading from the Epistles, and a reading from the Gospels - you see the Bible as lots of laws and moral teachings and doctrine, and you're quite content to leave it to a pastor or a priest to decipher it for you. But the problem with that is quite clear in that pastors and priests don't all agree on what it says, and so you're left in a bit of a quandary. Many people think that pastors can't agree on what the Bible means, how in the world am I going to figure it out. And so many people will think that the whole church is a mess and will leave it altogether. Some people will try this church and that church (God bless them) until they find a church where they feel comfortable and even inspired (a word which itself means "filled with the Spirit). But friendly people does not necessarily mean the same thing as sound teaching, and there are plenty of churches where you'll be sitting there one day, listening to the pastor or some leader, and you'll say, "Wait a minute. Is that what the Bible really says, or is that what it really means?"

And so my challenge for this coming year, or two years or three years, is to help you make sense of this book in a systematic way, to give you a bigger picture of what it's saying, and the framework for seeing the Bible is to see it as one story about God's unfailing love. That's right, even though the Bible is full of rules and regulations and doctrine, it's mainly a story that runs from the creation of the world to the resurrection of Jesus and the years immediately following that. And stories are fun and meaningful. Jesus understood this all too well; whenever he was doing something that people didn't like or didn't agree with, and they asked him to explain himself, he would start off saying, "Once upon a time there were two brothers, and they worked for their father..." He told stories that were a whole lot more meaningful than any set of rules or facts. They related to people's lives. The Bible still does that. And I believe that the more you can get a handle on the story it tells us, the more you'll be able to see how it applies to your life and how it has affected our own culture and our history, how it is shaped who we are today.

But back to today's topic, which has to do with Christmas; God's unfailing love. And my focus will be on two aspects of love; unfailing forgiveness and unfailing empowerment. And the story I'll use to illustrate this is one you may have heard about the first light bulb. Back in 1879...

I think this story illustrates those two qualities of God's unfailing love; its ability to forgive, and its ability to empower. Today we celebrate Christmas, and those same two qualities are seen in the Christmas story of Jesus' birth. Jesus came not just for the Jewish people but for the entire world. Everyone in the world drops light bulbs in such a way that it prevents God from really getting things done. It's not just about individual sin, because our individual sin affects everything around us. Sin is usually something that does damage to others, and this world to work the way God has planned it to work, we need to stop dropping light bulbs. God's plan is for all humanity to live together in peace. Not only that, but his plan does not include death; we experience death here, but what the Bible teaches us is that in God's perfect kingdom, which will one day rule over earth as it does in heaven, there is no death.

Now you might think that it would be better for God to simply fix everything by himself. We've dropped the light bulb so often that it just doesn't seem wise for us to handle it. But God's unfailing love is a love that not only forgives but also empowers. God's plan is for us to be the means of that wonderful end,

that Kingdom of God here on earth. And so God sends us Jesus to show what God is really like, to demonstrate forgiveness, and to show us his own plan for our eternal life – physical life, not just spiritual life; Jesus was raised in body, as we and those who have gone before us will one day be raised. But look at the way Jesus comes – as a child, born in a stall to poor parents. He is vulnerable and in need of so much care and love, and GOD EMPOWERS MARY AND JOSEPH BY GIVING THEM THIS CHARGE, TO RAISE THIS CHILD, WHO IS THE SON OF GOD. TALK ABOUT A VALUABLE LIGHT BULB. God shows us his own confidence in us in the birth of baby Jesus.

And through the Holy Spirit we are empowered by God to do something, namely to demonstrate that Jesus is Lord through our thoughts, words, and deeds. It's not just about claiming God's forgiveness because of a spoken prayer and thus saving our own butts; we're here for a task, and that is to make straight the way of the Lord by bringing this good news to all people, and we do that through word and deed – in word we declare the great news of God's love for us through Jesus Christ and his authority in this world. In deed we work to take care of the needs of all people, basic needs like food, medicine, decent housing and clean water as well as psychological needs like justice and peace that require us to speak out against injustice, domination, and oppression – that's right; our task goes far beyond our personal need to be *saved*; God thinks big – he is transforming the whole world.

And I mentioned that we demonstrate Christ's lordship by thoughts as well as words and deeds. The Holy Spirit does not turn you into some busy body who just feeds the hungry and houses the homeless for *God's* sake; the Holy Spirit transforms us into people who truly do love others as we love God so that our words and deeds are synced with our thoughts. We don't care for the poor while thinking that they are somehow criminal or lazy, and we don't elevate ourselves by thinking how much better we are. The Spirit changes us into people who truly love and care for all people, the rich and the poor, the sick and the healthy, the young and the old, the Muslim and the Jew, and everyone else.

Incarnate love expresses God's love for us and his plans for us. He is coming to dwell eternally with us, and his kingdom is coming for all. So let us celebrate this very special day, a day when God came in flesh and blood and brought with him such wonderful news about our future!