

God's Presence and the Church

Isaiah 63

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When I was little, I would often get scared and worried about many things. And there was always one person I wanted to be with me whenever I felt scared and worried. This person I wanted around more than anybody else was my mom. If my mom was not around and I felt worried about something, I longed for her to be with me because I knew that as soon as my mom was here, everything would be okay. No matter what I was scared about or worried about, as soon as my mom was near, I knew everything was fine. Her presence made all the difference. And maybe you have felt that way about somebody when you were little. Maybe right now, you're thinking of someone who, the moment they walk into the room, everything changes. They don't have to say one word. As soon as they walk into the room, you know that everything is going to be okay.

And it's great to have people like that in our lives, but if the presence of a human person can have that effect on us, how much more can the presence of God Himself have that same effect? And as we're going to read in Isaiah this morning, we find that very idea. So if you have your Bibles, you can turn to Isaiah 63, and we're going to be reading in verses seven through nine. So let's read together. Isaiah 63:7-9: "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. He said, 'Surely they are My people, children who will be true to Me'. And so He became their Savior. 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."

So here in Isaiah 63, we find God's people once again in distress, and the prophet tries to encourage them to faithfulness by writing a communal lament. This lament is like many of the laments you might read in the book of Psalms. And a lament is just a psalm that cries out to God. All of your pain and all of your suffering. And Isaiah here wants to identify with God's people through confession of sin, and bring their lament before God. But he also wants to stir their hearts by reminding them of God's acts of faithful kindness and love throughout their history. He wants them to remember His saving presence.

He starts off by telling the people that he will remember and recount the many acts of kindnesses and compassion the Lord has shown them. And in verse eight he says that God has become their Savior. And then in verse nine we read this: "In all their distress, He too

was distressed, and the angel of His presence saved them. In His love and mercy He redeemed them.” Isaiah reminds the people that in their distress, in their suffering, God identifies with them. He reminds them, in their suffering it was always God's presence that saved them and delivered them. He writes here about the angel of His presence. In other translations that just says “His presence.” But the idea behind it is that God Himself has always been the one doing the saving. God's presence equals salvation. Because when God is there, salvation is also there.

A. Back to the Beginning

1. Gloria Patri

Now, the key word “presence” is important here because that's the word I'm going to be focusing a lot on this morning. But before talking further about God's saving presence, I think it's important to go back to the beginning, because understanding the beginning will help us to understand what's to follow. There's an ancient hymn that is often sung in many congregations every Sunday, and it's called the Gloria Patri. And many of you might know this. It's a short hymn that gives praise to the Trinity, and the words are this: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”

I grew up in the Methodist Church, where this was sung multiple times every Sunday, so that was how I learned it. But when I was little, I didn't really understand what it meant. But now, whenever I hear it or read it, the phrase that always sticks out to me the most is the phrase that says, “as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.”

Naturally, when you read that or hear it, you start to think back to what was in the beginning. And in the beginning, in this context, was when God's presence dwelt with man in the garden, with Adam and Eve enjoying His presence unhindered. God lived and walked among His creation and everything was in perfect harmony. But when sin came in, everything became corrupt, and a barrier was made between the presence of God and people. But God still desired to be with His people. So God provided ways of His presence to remain with them throughout the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God's presence would come and dwell in things like the Tabernacle, but none of these ways were perfect. All of these ways prepared the way for the day when God would one day again bring His presence among His people.

2. Emmanuel, God With Us

God's people waited for the day when He would once again dwell with them, just like it was in the beginning. So now going back to Isaiah 63, even though this passage is from the Old

Testament, even though it was written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, it's often read on the first Sunday after Christmas because it reminds us of what we just celebrated: the coming of God's presence to bring us salvation. This passage in Isaiah finds its fulfillment in the coming of Jesus. God's presence came in the Person of Jesus, who is called Emmanuel, God with us. In this Isaiah passage, God saw the distress of His people and identified with them in their distress. And Isaiah now recalls how God's presence brought them salvation.

And now, in this season, we remember how God identified with us by becoming one of us and brought us salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is our salvation because God's very self, His very presence, has come to us in Him. As it says in Hebrews 1:3, Jesus "is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of His being." As the apostle John also wrote in John 1:18, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known."

And once again, it says in John that God's presence in Jesus has come to live among us. John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Now, the word in the original Greek that is translated here, "made His dwelling among us," could literally be translated as "tabernacled among us."

So why is that significant? Because God's presence dwelled in the tabernacle among His people in the Old Testament, and now His presence has come to dwell with us in Jesus. God's presence brings salvation, and salvation has come to us through Jesus. Jesus lived among us. He died. He was buried. He rose again. And through faith in Him we can find forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Salvation has come, but everything is not yet complete.

Just like at the beginning of every Advent season, we start preparing for Christmas Day, where we celebrate the coming of Jesus as a baby. Now, we are waiting and preparing for Jesus to come again. God's presence came to us in Jesus. But when Jesus ascended into heaven after His resurrection, He sent the Holy Spirit to be His presence in us. Now, while we are waiting for Him to come again to unite all things in heaven and earth, we are called to be vessels of God's presence to the world through the Holy Spirit that is given to us. We are called to be His hands and His feet. The church is called to be His body that manifests God's presence through the power of the Spirit.

And I'd like for us to think about what that means for us this morning. We just celebrated the coming of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. And now, as we wait for Him to come a second time, I'd like for us to think about what it means that the church is the place where

God's presence dwells through His Spirit. And I'd like for us to think about what that means on three different levels: the individual, the communal, and the global.

B. God's Presence and the Individual

On an individual level, God is present with us through His Spirit. In Ephesians it says that when we believe in Jesus, the moment we believe, we are sealed with God's Spirit, guaranteeing to us the hope that is to come: the inheritance of God's kingdom. When God's kingdom becomes fully complete, it will be just as Isaiah prophesied earlier in chapter 11, that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. God's presence will fill every nook and cranny in all of creation. We know that winter is ending when the days get longer, and we start seeing more and more green appear. In the same way, we get a taste of the hope to come now through God's presence in us through His Spirit. But the Spirit also points us forward to the day when the shadow of that will disappear, and the full reality will come.

The Holy Spirit also reminds us that we belong to God, so that we don't despair while we wait for that day. First John 4:13 says, "This is how we know that we live in Him and He in us: He has given us of His Spirit." And in Romans 8:16, Paul wrote that "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." God's presence through His Spirit reminds us of the salvation we have and also the salvation that is to come. As it says in Romans 8:23, "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies." We have God's presence with us through His Spirit, and His Spirit reminds us of who we are, that we belong to Him. And it points us towards the hope that is to come, sustaining us until the day of redemption, so that we do not lose heart or fall into despair.

c. God's Presence and Community

On the communal level, we are told in Ephesians that the church is being made into a dwelling place where God lives by His Spirit. In the Old Testament, God's presence was in the tabernacle, but the tabernacle was a shadow of what was to come. The Church is now the tabernacle of God, the place where God dwells among his people by His Spirit.

God's spirit is in each individual who trusts in Jesus. But individuals coming together as the Church are being made into a holy tabernacle. And in this holy dwelling, God's presence through His Spirit unites Jews and Gentiles, people from every race and nation. Through Jesus, everything that divides has been torn down, so that all who belong to Him can be brought together to make one new humanity in Him. In a world filled with so much division,

and a world where everything is divided into kid stuff over here, teen stuff over here, adult stuff over here, elderly things over here. Rich, wealthy over here. Poor alone over here.

Young and old, rich and poor; together on the same level, under the same roof. It's what we should find in the Church. The Church coming together as the new humanity created in Christ demonstrates God's presence to the world through the Spirit. Paul writes in Ephesians 3:10-11 that "[God's] intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to His eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." When the world looks at the church, it should see places where God's presence is displayed. No, it won't be perfect. But even in the imperfection, it can be displayed through the witnesses of forgiveness, kindness, joy, and peace, with the love of God and neighbor binding it all together.

D. God's Presence and the Global Goal

On a global level, creation itself awaits with groans for the day of redemption. Romans 8:20-21 says, "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the One Who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and the glory of the children of God."

So one day God's presence will be fully restored between Himself and all of creation, just like it was in the beginning, before the fall. On that day, God tells us through His Word that His glory will cover the earth. His presence will be everywhere, and wherever His presence is, there will be everlasting joy and peace. Salvation will be fully realized. It will be complete. God's presence came in and through Jesus. And now we wait for Jesus to come again, to bring God's presence in all of its fullness, in the restoration of all things.

Individuals with God's presence in them, and the church living as His body, are the firstfruits of the coming day when all of creation will be restored and everything will be as it ought to be.

E. Implications

1. Individual

Now, what does this mean for us practically? Now that we know this, how should we live in light of it? On an individual level, it means we can know that we are never out of the presence of God. Salvation is here and always near. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence to ask for what we need. We

can know that every second, Jesus is interceding for us. We can know that when we don't have the words to pray, the Spirit prays for us. We can know that the spirit in us is a deposit guaranteeing the hope to come. And we can know that God's presence through His Spirit is living in us to help us and enable us to do good works and to follow through with every prompting for good work.

We know that God's presence through the Spirit is renewing us day by day more and more into the image of His Son. God's image that was broken in us and is now being put back together through Jesus. We can know that we have a new identity. We are in Christ, and God's presence in us through the Spirit can help us live into that life which we possess. And the Holy Spirit can help us clothe ourselves with Christ. God's presence in us through the Spirit can help that clothing with Christ become more and more a part of our very being, a part of our character. The more we practice it, the more we live into it.

2. Communal

But we cannot do this alone. We need each other. There are many books and resources out there about spiritual formation and disciplines and habits of the spiritual life and things like that. And these are good. These are valuable. We all should read those things. But if I'm allowed to have one criticism of those things, it's that most of the time they focus too much on the individual and hardly at all on the power of community and the role it plays in spiritual formation.

I don't know about you, but I'm assuming this is true for most everybody. But whenever I think back to the times in my life where I grew the most, where things were the most influential in moments of change for my life, it always comes back to relationships. And so we need one another. So then on a communal level, we are to take the salvation that is being worked out in us through the Spirit, and we are to share it with one another. What does that look like?

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, the main character, a preacher named John Ames, provides us with a good picture of that. So in a section in the novel, Ames is writing a letter to his son, and in this letter he says this: "So to be forgiven is only half the gift. The other half is that we also can forgive, restore, and liberate, and therefore we can feel the will of God enacted through us, which is the great restoration of ourselves to ourselves." So when we do good works, when we encourage one another, when we forgive one another, when we bear with each other, when we are patient with each other, when we help carry each other's burdens, we are sharing God's saving presence with one another. And God is enacting His will through us, through the Spirit. As it says in Ephesians, when the whole body is knitted and put together in love, it grows to become a place where God dwells by His Spirit.

As we share in this presence in the church, we are reminded that we are saved and yet still being saved. And that that is also true of everybody else, that they are saved, but yet they are also still being saved. When we are with one another in suffering, when we cry with those who cry, when we laugh and are joyful with those who laugh and are joyful, we are being God's presence to others. He is enacting His will through us, and we and others get a taste of His presence among us. When we forgive and treat others the way we would want to be treated, the Holy Spirit uses us to be vessels of God's presence, and when we are ready to do good to everyone, to show kindness, compassion, mercy, and generosity, we are bringing God's presence through the Spirit to those who need it.

This is what it means to be His hands and feet. This is what it means for the church to be His body in the world. The fullness of Him who fills everything in every way. And this is why He left us His Spirit, so that while we wait for His return, His presence can still be in the world through the church, pointing people to the “here but not yet” reality of God's kingdom. It is here now, but not yet complete.

3. Global

And this then leads us to the global level again. So we are to live as individuals and in community with each other in light of what is coming. Jesus has already come once, bringing God's presence to dwell with us. Think of actors in a play rehearsing for the night of the big performance. We are now rehearsing for the day where God's presence will be fully with us. When He will be our God, we will be His people, enjoying His presence without any hindrance whatsoever, like it was in the beginning. As we live individually and communally in God's presence through the Spirit, it has global implications. As the Spirit testifies with our spirit, as we suffer, as we do good to everyone--even our enemies, as we learn to forgive, bearing with and being patient with one another. And as it is all knitted together in love, we grow in the image of Christ, and it points us and others towards the day when sin and death, and all of the fruit of sin and death will be no more. Every good work we do, every time we forgive, every time we show patience and kindness, every time we bear one another's burdens, it is a sign of what's to come.

In the words of one of my former favorite rock bands, Switchfoot, “it is the shadow that proves the sunshine.” We are glimpsing the part now, but one day we will see the whole. The more and more we practice living into this salvation and the life that is ours through Jesus, the more and more it will become an entrenched part of us. As it becomes an internal part of our character, it points us and others towards the day when all things in heaven and on earth will be united together under Christ, where every tear will be wiped away, every sorrow will be gone. Where all mourning will turn into rejoicing, and this will all be because God's presence will come in all of its fullness, and everything will be restored to

as it was in the beginning. Everything will be as it is supposed to be, and we will never, ever again say about anything that it should not be that way.

Now His presence has come in Jesus, Emmanuel. And we wait for His second coming, and the day when His presence covers the earth like the waters cover the seas. While we wait, it is our job to be vessels of God's presence through the Spirit to a needy and hungry world. The Church can be God's presence to a world that needs to know that somehow, everything can be okay. They need to know that somehow, all the wrongs will one day be made right.

To live fully in God's presence where there is everlasting joy and peace is what we long for, whether we know it or not. It's what we need the most, whether we know it or not. And it's what we were created for. I'd like to close with these lyrics from a song by Jason Gray. It's called Everything Sad is Coming Untrue, part 2.

“The winter can make us wonder if spring was ever true
But every winter breaks upon the Easter lily's bloom
Could it be everything sad is coming untrue?
Could you believe everything sad is coming untrue?

Broken hearts are being unbroken
Bitter words are being unspoken
The curse undone, the veil is parted
The garden gate will be left unguarded

Could it be everything sad is coming untrue?
Oh, I believe everything sad is coming untrue
In the hands of the One who is making all things new

When the storm leaves there's a silence
That says you don't have to fear anymore
The trees look greener, the sky's an ocean
The world is washed and starting over”

Let's pray. Father, we thank You so much for this time of year, where we get to celebrate the coming of Your Son to be our Savior. Lord, we were created to be in Your presence. We were created to worship You. We were created to live in unhindered fellowship with You. But that is broken because of our sin. And Lord, we don't know exactly how it's going to happen. We don't know exactly what it's going to look like. But we do know that one day You are going to come again, and that one day You are going to make everything right. You are going to wipe away our tears, and You are going to be with us. You will be our God, we will be Your people,

and everything will be like it was in the beginning. But Lord, help us as we wait. Help us to be Your hands and feet. Help us to be Your body. Teach us to forgive, teach us to be patient, teach us to be kind, teach us to be generous. And above all, teach us to love You, to love our neighbor as ourselves. And we pray, Father, that as You use us in those ways, Your Spirit would show the world Your saving presence and that You would help us to be vessels of Your presence to people who really need to know that everything is going to be okay. Please help us, hurry to help us, Lord. We thank You for Your Love. It's in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.