

Isaiah 63:7-14

New Year's Eve, Dec. 31, 2022

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I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast

love. ⁸ *For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely." And he became their Savior.* ⁹ *In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.* ¹⁰ *But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.* ¹¹ *Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit,* ¹² *who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name,* ¹³ *who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble.* ¹⁴ *Like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the LORD gave them rest. So you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name.*

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." Perhaps you've read that poem before, or at least are familiar with that first line. I was reminded of that line as I read through this text from Isaiah, because that's kind of what Isaiah is doing here. The only difference is that Isaiah really flips it around; he's really saying, "How do YOU love me? Let me count the ways." And then look at the list he comes up with in our text: "**He became their Savior.**" "**In all their affliction He was afflicted.**" "**He redeemed them.**" "**He...put in the midst of them His Holy Spirit.**" "**[He] divided the waters before them.**" "**The Spirit of the Lord gave them rest.**" This text is really just a long list of the loving kindness that God had shown His people, and I'm sure if we took some time this morning, we could each come up with a long list of the love that God has shown each of us as well.

But what really makes this re-counting of God's love more interesting is the verses that precede our text. Those verses contain some of the more graphic depictions of God's judgment found anywhere in Scripture. In those verses, Isaiah is having a conversation with God, and he asks, "**Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like his who treads in the winepress?**" And then God responds, "**I have trodden in the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood spattered on my garments and stained all my apparel. I trampled down the peoples in my anger; I made them drunk in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.**" (Isaiah 63:2-3) What Isaiah took to be grape juice staining the Lord's robes was actually the blood of unbelievers that God had trod out. Pretty graphic stuff!

And yet, *just after* that description, what does Isaiah say? "**I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us.**" Which might seem like an odd reaction, and yet when confronted with the reality of God's judgment as Isaiah was, there's really only two ways you can react. You can **1)** do as the world does: decide God doesn't exist, decide it's all a big joke, mock God and anyone who would believe in Him. Or you can **2)** do as the Christian does (and it's the only sane response): You run to Christ and recount His gospel promises and *know* that due to Christ, you are saved from God's winepress judgment. And Isaiah gives that only sane response. In the face of God's judgment, he turns to God's steadfast love and all the proofs of His love to Israel.

That serves as a wonderful example for us as we look back over the past year. If you look back over the last 365 days, I'm guessing you can find many blessings to reflect upon joyfully. The birth of a child, a wedding, the blessing of a church family, a big move—we all have much to thank the Lord for today. Considering that, let's read starting at verse 8 of our text to see similar blessings to Israel, but then let's also consider Israel's response: ***"He said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely." And he became their Savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit."***

In 2022, God certainly did fill our cups with blessings to overflowing, and yet how often did we, in response, thank God by spitting in His face? It's true, isn't it? These verses written about Israel some 2,800 years ago could have been written about each of us in 2022. Think about all those times when we served our own interests first, when we loved ourselves over God and others, when we struggled to forgive one another, when our thankfulness only lasted a short period of time before giving way to discontent. This reality is true for all of us, and so we ought to take that graphic warning of God's winepress judgment *very* seriously, as it looms ever closer before us.

So, what can we do? Again, there's two responses. We can **1)** do as the world does and decide it doesn't matter, that there is no God to answer to. We can do as the world does and give up hope. Or we can do as the world does and pretend that we're good enough that we should be able to avoid be trampled in God's winepress. *Or*, we can **2)** do as the Christian does, which is the only sane thing. Together with Isaiah, you can say, *"Yes, Lord, I know I'm a sinner. I know I deserve this judgment. But let me recount the steadfast love of the Lord, for I know that YOU are my Savior."* And that's exactly what we're going to do this evening as 2022 comes to a close. In the words of our theme:

Let Us Recount God's Steadfast Love

- I. The steadfast love shown to Israel (Matthew 2:13-23)
- II. The steadfast love shown to us today (Galatians 4:4-7)

We'll start by re-considering the first three verses of our Gospel reading from Matthew 2: ***"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."***

That probably doesn't sound like much at first blush, or at least it doesn't seem to be of great importance to the greater nation of Israel. But there is something very important taking place in these verses. The text says that Joseph took his family down to Egypt and then brought them back. Can you think of any other family for which that was true? This small family of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were faced with *certain* danger in the land of Israel, so they fled for safety to the land of Egypt. Once the danger had subsided, they returned to the promised land.

Yes, that exact same series of events did happen to another family several thousand years before this. That was the patriarch Jacob and his family, which became known as Israel. They had been faced with the certain danger of the famine, fled in safety to Egypt, and hundreds of years later they finally

returned to the promised land during the Exodus. These two events are connected, Jesus' journey to Egypt and back along with Israel's journey to Egypt and back. You see, it was God's very intentional plan for His Son to follow in the very footsteps of Israel.

Can you remember anything that happened to Israel on that return journey to the promised land? There's one major event that sticks out. God had cut a deal with His people; He established His covenant between Israel and Himself through Moses. But before He actually wrote down the words of the covenant, He outlined the terms of that agreement. We can find those terms in Exodus 19: ***"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."*** (v. 4-6)

If the Israelites would keep His commandments, then they would continue to be His special people. It was a two-sided arrangement. Israel would hold up their end of the bargain, and God would hold up His side and treat them as His beloved child. And, of course, we know how long Israel was able to stay the course. Before Moses had even returned down from the mountain, they had created for themselves a new god and threw themselves at it in worship.

And that's why we see Jesus following in Israel's footsteps here. Look back at verse 15 from our Gospel reading: ***"This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'"*** The prophet speaking there is Hosea, who originally wrote, ***"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."*** (Hosea 11:1) God loved Israel as His own Son, and He called that nation out of Egypt. *But*, Israel failed to live as God's Son, they rebelled against His covenant with them. ***"Out of Egypt I called my son,"*** was a statement that God wanted Israel to fulfill, the role of "son" which He wanted for them. Yet, because they rebelled against God and broke their covenant, they could not be God's son. So, to bring Hosea's words to fulfillment, Jesus takes the place of Israel. He reenacts their history, going down to Egypt and back, but where they failed, Jesus succeeded. All of this was done to make Israel God's child yet again.

And how did Jesus do that? By going where they went (to Egypt and back), by standing where they stood (in the waters of the Jordan River), by fighting and winning spiritual battles where they fought and lost (in the wilderness), and ultimately, by dying where and how they deserved to die—in their place on the cross for as the ransom price for their sins. God had become flesh to take the place of His rebellious children of Israel; He served in their place as *the* perfect Son. So that even though they failed, they would continue to *be* His children, they would continue to be His treasured possession.

Well, how does that apply to us going into 2023? This whole account of Israel rebelling against God, yet the Son coming and taking their place by reenacting their history *without* sin, that really encapsulates, on a grand scale, your personal stories from 2022. And we can read about God's continued steadfast love which He shows to each one of us today in our epistle reading from Galatians: ***"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."*** (Galatians 4:4-7)

Are you making any New Year's resolutions for the coming year? One type of resolution that we as Christians might make is to try to amend our sinful lives. Whether it be to have more patience, to not be given to lust, to be a better example for Christ—I'm guessing you've all resolved to do something like that in the past. Maybe you even make these types of resolutions on a daily basis. It falls in line with God's desire for us: ***"You shall be perfect for I the Lord your God am perfect."*** (Leviticus 19:2) And if you made that type of resolution last year, I can guess how well you did in 2022. Like me, like the children of Israel at the base of Mt. Sinai, it likely wasn't too long at all until you slipped back into those same sins that you struggle with daily.

Just like the Children of Israel, none of us can be the children that God demands us to be. No, rather than children, God describes us in our Galatians reading as having been slaves! Slaves under the bonds of the law, slaves deserving God's winepress judgment. As Isaiah wrote about Israel, God could rightfully say to each of us: ***"I became your Savior. In all your afflictions I was afflicted, and the angel of my presence saved you; in my love and in my pity I redeemed you; I lifted you up and carried you all the days of old. But you rebelled and grieved my Holy Spirit."***

And yet, here is where God's steadfast love is on *full display* towards you. Rather than rejecting us as we rebel against Him, what does Paul say God does instead? ***"[He redeems] those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."*** He paid the price to free us from this captivity! He paid it with His blood, and He paid it out of love. He did it so that we might be *adopted* into His family.

I remember when I was younger I used to think that adoption was an embarrassing thing. I thought that because siblings sometimes like to poke fun at each other and say, "Well, you're adopted!" And it's often portrayed similarly in cartoons. And so, if I ever knew someone who had been adopted, I would never mention the subject. I figured that I would embarrass them if I brought it up. And yet, to an orphan, there is no *greater* thing that they could possibly hear than, "Congratulations, you've been adopted!" And that is the way that God has welcomed you into His family. Though there was nothing attractive about you, though you could not possibly deserve it, Christ gave Himself so that *you* could be God's child. So, "Congratulations, you've been adopted!"

But will that relationship continue into the New Year? It's easy to re-count God's steadfast love that He's already shown us, but how do we know that He'll still remain steadfast in His love for us in 2023? What if He changes His mind? You know that you're going to mess up, you know you're going to fall into sin many times. What if you finally sin enough that God decides He's done with you—that you are no longer worth His love? Well, if you find yourself wondering whether God's going to still put up with you in 2023, you can do one of two things.

1) You can do as the world does. You can give up hope and run away from God. Or **2)** you can recount God's steadfast love. You can cling to Christ's cross since He has redeemed you. You can remember that it was God who bought you back from the shackles of death. And you can be certain that just as He loved and took the place of Israel 2000 years ago, so He loves you and has taken your place. And then you can be assured that this promise remains: He will never leave you nor forsake you. Not in 2023, not in any year of your life. So, thanks be to God for the steadfast love which He's shown to us in the past year and which He promises us in the years to come. Amen!