

There is one phrase in this prophecy that describes the motivation of God the Father in sending his Son into the world. What is that motivation? His tender mercy. God's mercy is his love for the undeserving.

There is more than meets the eye in this phrase. This is speaking of mercy that starts at the very heart of God. The word "tender" actually means inward parts (bowels, intestines). It's referring to what is deep down inside. It is like when we use the phrase "from the bottom of my heart". It's the deepest part of us. And here it is describing the mercy of God. His tender mercy or mercy in the deepest place within him. It means that God's mercy is sincere and motivating him deep within. When God acts in tender mercy, he holds nothing back, compassion streams forth like the rays of the sun. We might say that God's mercy is massive and extreme in its tenderness. And so, of course, we cannot fit it into our finite heads and hearts.

This mercy goes to the heart of what we celebrate at Christmas. And this is so important because when it gets into us, it will begin to shape what we love more and more. And what you love shows fundamentally who you are. When God's tender mercy is driven deep into your heart, you will find that your love for God is growing and your love for others is growing. And wouldn't this be the greatest Christmas gift you could receive? The massive mercy and lovingkindness of God flooding your heart and reforming it to love God in return and love your neighbor.

So let's look at this text and what God, in mercy, is motivated to do. **God's massive and intense mercy is what I want you to hear and know and experience in your hearts today. And when you celebrate Christmas, sitting around the dinner table or opening packages, I want you to think of mercy!**

1) First, God shows tender mercy in sending Christ to visit us. Verse 78 says,

Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise [Christ] shall visit us from on high...

There are numerous visitations of God in the OT, but this is not like those. God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. He appeared to Joshua as the commander of the Lord's army. And there are many, many other examples. These are what we would call theophanies, where God gives a visible manifestation of himself to people. He appears as fire or even a human being. But this visitation was altogether new. God visited from on high in a new way. In the coming of Christ, the eternal Son of God did not just manifest as a man. He became one. The prologue of the gospel of John begins this way:

In the beginning was the Word [God the Son, Jesus Christ], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. John 1:1-3

And then we get to the climactic statement several verses later in John 1:14 when it says, "*And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" This word "dwelt" means "pitched his tent" - a clear allusion to the tabernacle in the wilderness, where God dwelt in the midst of his people. He dwelt among us in the flesh. The holy, eternal God humbled himself to dwell among us **as one of us**. How much like us did he become? Hebrews 2 says, "he was made like us (not in some ways, but) in every way". Of course, there is one key way in which he was not like us - he never sinned. God wrapped himself in humanity, became flesh and dwelt

among us. And because he was made like us in every (yet without sin), we joyfully sing the words of the song, *“Come to earth to taste our sadness, he whose glories knew no end. By his life he brings us gladness, our Redeemer, Shepherd, Friend.”* What condescension! But that wasn't the end for which Jesus came. It wasn't to walk the earth in the flesh for 33 years and then leave. No. He lived, was crucified for our sin, rose again, and through faith in him, he now dwells in us by his Spirit!

Galatians 4:4-6 has become, maybe, my favorite passage in the past year. God *sent forth* his Son... to redeem us, so that we might be adopted as sons. And because we are sons, God sent forth the Spirit into our hearts crying, “Abba! Father!”. And so though Jesus no longer walks the earth in the flesh, we are now the temple of the living God, the Spirit of God dwells in the heart of every believer!

But notice who Christ visits - what mercy! Those who need forgiveness (verse 77). In other words, he comes to sinners. He comes to the undeserving with salvation. There was no divine edict, “Get your act together and I will come and help you.” If we are not careful, we may tend to think that “God helps those who help themselves.” But that is not the gospel. Jesus comes to the sick not healthy, he needy not self-sufficient, the sinful not righteous with full and free pardon from sin. Check this out. Romans 5:6-8 says,

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die-- 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

If you are saved today, it is because the God of tender, extreme mercy visited you.

2) God shows tender mercy in visiting us with gifts. Again, look at verse 78 and notice what he GIVES:

Because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise [Christ] shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

The visitation of Christ is described as the rising of the sun. The night is on its way out, a new day is dawning. This is not just a matter of looking on the bright side of things, like “hey it's a new day.” What is being described here is huge. The coming of Christ into the world was the dawning of a new era, a new age. There is an amazing sense of anticipation. Like a child waiting for the slightest sliver of the sun to rise on the eastern horizon Christmas morning, because of all the gifts that day is going to bring to him (Cedric).

For the Christian, the sun has risen - Christ as come! And with the rising of the sun, the Son of God, our Lord comes bearing gifts. Verse 79 describes what he gives: *“to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”* Light. Life. Peace. Three ways to describe our salvation.

He gives us **light** for our darkness. Those who sit in darkness - stuck in darkness with no hope. What's this darkness? Ignorance of spiritual truth. We were in utter darkness; spiritual darkness, utterly devoid and completely ignorant of the truth. Ephesians 4:18 describes those separated from Christ as *“darkened in their*

understanding.” And that is what we once were! But Christ came, the sun rose on our darkness, and gave us light, opening our eyes to see the truth of who He is.

He gives us **life**. LIFE, LIFE, ETERNAL LIFE! We were in the shadow of death, dead in our sins and deserving of eternal separation from God. The enemy of death, casting its dark shadow over each one of us with no hope beyond the grave. But in Christ’s coming, death, and resurrection, he has put our death to flight - *“Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth!”* And he has not just given us life *someday*. Romans 6 says, we have been raised with Christ, and are to walk in newness of life *now!*

He gives **peace**. Christ comes to give us peace with God, a peace that surpasses all comprehension. And enables us to be peacemakers - it says, “to guide our feet in the way of peace.” That we may walk in peace. So God shows tender, intense mercy in visiting us with gifts through **Christ: light, life, peace**.

3) God shows tender mercy in giving us a certain hope.

I want to look at a different angle of the phrase *“the sunrise shall visit us from on high.”* Christ’s first Advent is not like the sun in full strength. The metaphor of Christ’s coming at Christmas as the sunrise is meant to stir up in us longing and hope. And by hope I mean, the certain confidence in something that you don’t yet fully possess. We praise God for the work of Christ. His incarnation, his perfect obedience, his shed blood, the debt he paid, God’s wrath removed, forgiveness paid for, adoption guaranteed, the down payment of the Holy Spirit - and glorious joy, even now. But it is not the end yet. We know that!

Death still dogs us. Disease still ravages. We still battle sin daily. Satan still roams, like a lion seeking to devour. Romans 8:23 says, “we all groan inwardly waiting for the redemption of our bodies”. We still wait eagerly for Christ to come. So the Christian - you and I (if you believe in Christ) - along with the joy and glory of what Christ has done, still longs for the consummation of all things. I love the long O Come, O Come Immanuel. It beautifully strikes the note of joy and sorrow, victory and longing. It strikes the note of the already (what we have in Christ) and the not yet (what we still wait for).

*Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Oh, bid our sad divisions cease,
And be yourself our King of Peace.
Rejoice, rejoice, Immanuel, shall come to thee O Israel.*

And so this picture of Christ’s coming as the sun rising is meant to pick up our weary hearts with deep encouragement. It is meant to fill us with hope and help us see that the end is certain. Because when you see the sun rising, it is just a matter of time until it is shining in full strength overhead. And it is just a matter of time until Christ comes again and all groaning ends, death is no more, disease no more, our battle with sin and the flesh gone forever. And everything sad will come untrue.

And God our Father, who is so rich in tender mercy and loves us so much, wants us to be filled with this hope - the hope of Christ’s second Advent when he wraps everything. Do you have this hope? It can make you

strong and durable in an uncertain world. This is actually what made early Christians unstoppable - the certainty of their future hope in Christ. The God of massive mercy gives us a certain hope.

How would God have us respond this morning? I think in two ways:

1) Let your heart be melted by the tender mercy of God.

Sit under it's light and heat for a while, until your heart is softened like wax - moldable by the Lord of glory.. Don't listen to this news like the evening news - "Interesting... what's next." Or like yesterday's news, "I've already heard this." Yes but has it melted you? Josiah was said to have a tender heart - do you? Has the tender mercy of God made your heart tender? Linger here until it is.

Many come in here today with cold, stony hearts. A block of ice may have a small layer melted off the top in a short in in the sun. But it takes time for the entire block to melt. Fix your thoughts on the tender mercy of God, pleading with God until you feel it and are melted by it, until the reality is pulsating through your veins? There is no more important matter of business for you!

2) Spread mercy.

Spread the mercy of God by telling others of our excellent, merciful God. 1 Peter 2:8-9 → "[You are a people for God's own possession that you might] *proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. For once you were not a people... once you had not received mercy, now you have received mercy.*"

Spread mercy by being merciful. We should be the most merciful people in the world. Unfortunately, it is not often the case. We have received mercy. The mighty, holy God has opened up his massive heart of love and poured it out upon us. How can we turn from that and mistreat others.

Ephesians 4:32 says, "*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.*"

God has been tender-hearted toward you in Christ. So treat others that way. If you are a hard and unmerciful person, the problem is that the tender mercy of God has not gone deep enough. But what God's tender mercy that comes from the bottom of his heart, went to the bottom of ours, and you were able to spread it to others?

Wouldn't that be the best Christmas gift? Please stand and let's pray.