

Sermon for 1 Christmas
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The prophet Isaiah says, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” He also looks forward to a time when God himself will make his people righteous. “The Lord God will cause righteousness ... to spring forth before all the nations.” Righteousness is one of those churchy words. It gets sprinkled so liberally through the scripture that we’ve forgotten what it means. It’s a word that has a *feel* to it, rather than conveying a clear idea.

So what does this word mean? Its root meaning is a legal one. It has to do with Justice. The man is righteous who has been judged to be in the right. If the law is on your side, then you’re righteous. And if the law itself is righteous, it all boils down to a very simple concept: Do the right thing. It’s not really about abstract ideas. It’s about right behavior in community with your neighbor.

That leaves us with two questions. How do we know what is right behavior? And how can we do it? As to the first question, God has been very obliging about setting it all out. Certainly, cultural norms change, and ritual standards change over time. But God created an orderly world, which operates in an orderly way. Putting things before God is wrong. Killing people for selfish reasons is wrong. Adulterating or breaking primary relationships of marriage and family is wrong. Even Jesus’ supposed expansion of the list to include lust and hatred is simply a teaching on the true extent of the tenth commandment, not to covet. Desiring things that are not for you, whether or not you actively pursue them, is wrong. The list, with its extended commentaries in the Old and New Testaments, has always been substantially comprehensive.

The problem is the second question. We simply cannot always do what’s right. No matter how hard we try, that tenth commandment and its corollaries will always get us. We just cannot stop desiring things that are not for us. That’s why, in the passage from Isaiah this morning righteousness is closely linked to salvation. God has “clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” “Her vindication [or righteousness] goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch.” Our salvation is not simply a passive proposition. God saves us *from* our unrighteousness, by helping us to *be*

righteous. These two concepts are so completely identified, because salvation restores us to right relationship with God. And Isaiah says here that being in God will produce righteousness just as being in the earth causes seeds to sprout up and fulfill their promise.

This is the answer to the old dispensational conundrum: Law versus Grace. The law is never abolished. But God promises to save us and make us righteous. This is what St. Paul is on about in his letter to the Galatians when he talks about the law being our custodian, or schoolmaster, until Christ came; and about God sending the spirit of his son into our hearts. The law cannot make anyone righteous, in and of itself. It can only show us clearly that we are not righteous. Just as a schoolmaster cannot make you understand anything, but only point out the truth when you are mistaken. So the law only highlights the problem. This is good, because if we didn't realize the problem, we wouldn't be looking for an answer.

But now that God has adopted us as sons and heirs, we have the Holy Spirit in us to empower us. That doesn't mean we're perfect yet. We are still like those shoots coming up from the seed in the ground. But every day, we should be growing just a little more. It might be imperceptible. Have you ever watched a plant grow? It's boring. But if you come back a week later, or a month, or a year later, you will see the change. The plant is becoming more and more itself. And this is what God has made possible for us. We become more and more like what we are: sons and heirs of God. And as such, we exhibit his righteousness.

You see, unlike the schoolmaster law, God can make us righteous. The law can only tell us what is right, but God *does* what is right ... always. Once again, this is not an abstract idea. God is righteous simply because he does what is right. And therefore he has the power to make us righteous, as well. We have a description of that in the gospel today. The great prologue to St. John's Gospel is a window into the life of the Holy Trinity before creation. But in the context of its doctrinal import, it also communicates something else just as important. John tells us that God has kept his promises. Among others, he has kept this promise made hundreds of years ago through the prophet Isaiah. He has done this in the Incarnation of Jesus, the eternal Son of God.

The Word of God, who was with God and was God, through whom all of creation was made, “became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” This is what we celebrate at Christmastide. This person of immeasurable majesty and might left the glory of the divine existence in order to become one of us. And he didn’t even get a decent reception. “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.” He knew ahead of time what the outcome had to be. He came anyway. He was faithful to his creation. Regardless of the pain and humiliation he had to undergo, *he did what was right.*

“The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Our Lord came to make known the character of God. And under the brightness of such light in the darkness, who has room for self-righteousness? But “from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace” and “the power to become children of God.” We are no longer slaves to the darkness, but heirs of this radical and unstinting righteousness that causes God to become man in order to make us righteous.

God does what is right, regardless of the consequences to himself. Shall we not do the same? I pray so. But we can only do it in the power of God himself. “God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” In the power of the Holy Spirit, we recognize him whom we want to emulate. And in his power, we are made able to do so.

Isaiah says, “The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory.” Father, help us to make it so.