

The Peaceable Kingdom

With righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth (Isaiah 11:4).

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9

Song: “Joy to the World”

In spring 2023, a zoo in Grand Rapids, Michigan, was excited for their new exhibit featuring pygmy hippos and other African animals. Shortly before the exhibit’s opening, however, a pygmy hippo suddenly attacked and killed an antelope being introduced into the enclosure. Even in a zoo, many wild animals are dangerous and unpredictable. There is not always peace in the animal kingdom.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming Messiah who would one day bring peace to both humanity and to the natural world. God’s Spirit rests upon this servant. He brings peace, not by ignoring evil, but by judging it with righteousness and justice. The poor and the needy will be delivered, and the wicked will be judged. Under His reign, the animal kingdom will be at peace: predators, such as wolves and leopards, will lie down next to lambs and goats. Young children will be safe wherever they play. The world will know peace because the whole earth “will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD” (Isaiah 11:9).

Who is this promised Messiah? Jesus, of course! His reign on earth will bring justice and peace to all. No wonder we sing “Joy to the World”! Let Heaven and nature sing!

Father, thank You for sending the promised Messiah, Jesus, to the world. In Jesus’ name, amen.

December 16–22. **Laura N. Sweet** is a wife, mother, grandmother, and former Christian school teacher. She writes from her home in Midland, Michigan.

Streams in the Wasteland

[God said,] “See, I am doing a new thing! . . . I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:19).

Scripture: Isaiah 43:14-21

Song: “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

It didn't take our family long to realize that we hadn't brought enough water for our hike into the Valley of Fire State Park in Nevada. Our desire to see the ancient petroglyphs (rock carvings) led us into the desert at midday, with just a few bottles of water between us. Fifteen minutes later we were high-tailing it back to the air-conditioned car. We opted for the driving tour!

Isaiah delivered God's Word to His spiritually thirsty people. Israel, faced with the oppression of the Babylonians, remembered when God delivered them from the Egyptians by snuffing the pursuers out like a lamp's wick in the Red Sea (Isaiah 43:17). God remembered this too, and He promised that one day He would cause the Babylonians to flee their own land as fugitives. But He wanted His people to consider more than just their past: “See, I am doing a new thing!” God declared, promising to make a way in the wilderness for them (v. 19). They would then praise the Lord, the Holy One and their Redeemer.

Ultimately, the “new thing” God promised His people is the coming of Jesus Christ! He is the living water that quenches our spiritual thirst and gives us life forevermore. He alone can satisfy our souls.

Father, satisfy me with the living water that comes from Christ alone. In Jesus' name, amen.

The View from Above

How then can we be saved? (Isaiah 64:5).

Scripture: Isaiah 64

Song: “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”

I watched news coverage of a small city in Texas that was hit by a tornado. The view from the street was shocking, but the full impact was seen from the drone camera that flew over the entire area. Every home was damaged; every street was filled with debris. As far as you could see, there was complete and utter devastation.

In Isaiah 64, the prophet also saw a view from above as he considered the condition of Israel from God’s perspective. While he longed for God to come and avenge His people, he knew why God didn’t act on their behalf: Israel continued to sin against God’s ways. They were unclean; even their righteous acts were like filthy rags (v. 6). Because of this, God allowed Israel’s enemies to overrun the nation. The temple was destroyed, and Israel was a wasteland. The prophet lamented the devastation and pled for God’s mercy. If God didn’t turn from His anger, how could His people be saved?

Israel’s situation was desperate. Apart from Jesus, so is ours. Paul tells us in Romans 3:23 that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The good news this Christmas season is that God did have pity on us and sent His Son, Jesus, to earth to be our Savior. Our situation is not hopeless; we can be saved by believing what the Bible tells us about Him!

Father, I receive Your Word regarding my sin and my need for salvation. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Little Bethlehem

Thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, . . . out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel (Micah 5:2, *KJV*).

Scripture: Micah 5:1-6

Song: “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Phillips Brooks (1835–1893) was working on some music for the children’s choir of his church to sing on Christmas Eve. He remembered his journey to the Holy Land a few years earlier, when he had attended a Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Brooks was awed by the beauty, the simplicity, and the reality of Christ’s birth in that little town. The experience was his inspiration for the carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

For much of its history, Bethlehem was just a little town, an unimportant crossroads not far from Jerusalem. But this was the place God chose for a special distinction! Even though Bethlehem was “small among the clans,” Israel’s great ruler would be born there (Micah 5:2). This ruler’s origins were from ancient times—from eternity past! His strength was in the name of the Lord. He would deliver His people from all their enemies, and they would dwell in safety forever.

We know this promised ruler from Bethlehem is Jesus! He didn’t come simply to deliver His people from their enemies; He came to save them from their sins. To this day, Bethlehem is known to the world because Jesus was born there. Have you received Him as Your Savior? May Christ be at home in our hearts this Christmas!

Father, thank You for blessing my life with the presence of Your Son. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The Word of God Made Flesh

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:14).

Scripture: John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18

Song: “What Child Is This?”

This time of year you can see any number nativity scenes depicting the birth of Christ. I’ve seen them in shopping malls, public parks, in front of churches, and on my neighbors’ front lawns. While I appreciate seeing these, I sometimes wonder how many people believe that Jesus began His existence as that tiny baby in the manger. Yet nothing could be further from the truth!

Today’s reading reminds us that Jesus—God the Son—has always existed. The apostle John refers to Jesus as “the Word”—the greatest way that God will ever speak to us. Not only was Jesus *with* God from the very beginning, Jesus *is* God! He created all things that are in existence. He “became flesh” and lived among us as a man (John 1:14). But the very world He created neither recognized Him nor received Him.

Why did Jesus come to earth as a human being? John tells us: “To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (v. 12). Jesus came into the world to offer us rescue from sin’s penalty. He wouldn’t remain a little baby in a manger. One day He would die on a cross so that we might become the children of God! That’s the main message of the Christmas story.

Father, thank You for revealing Your Son, Jesus, to me so I might receive Him as my Savior. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The King upon His Throne

After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Hebrews 1:3).

Scripture: Hebrews 1

Song: “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

On May 6, 2023, the world watched the coronation ceremony of King Charles III. The day was filled with pomp and pageantry, with celebrities and heads of state from many nations attending the event. But the main focus, of course, was on the king himself as he sat on the traditional coronation chair, the newly crowned monarch of the Commonwealth realms.

In today’s passage, the writer of Hebrews calls attention to Jesus, the Son of God and heir of all things. Jesus not only created the universe, but He also sustains it by His powerful word. When He died on the cross, He provided purification for our sins. Now as the resurrected Savior, He is seated on the throne at God’s right hand, wielding a scepter of justice. He is eternal, unchanging, and set above all others—even the angels who serve and worship Him. The Lord Jesus is superior to all creation.

Let’s remember that the little baby in the Christmas story is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is the King of Heaven and earth! As we contemplate the events of Christmas this week, let’s join the angels in reverent worship and sincere service to our glorious Lord and Savior.

Father, when the celebrations of the season distract me from the true meaning of Christmas, help me to reset my focus on Jesus, my King.

An Amazing Birth Announcement

[The angel said to the shepherds,] “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

Scripture: Luke 2:1-16

Song: “Silent Night”

It may seem quaint and old-fashioned now, but back when I was having my babies, we would mail out birth announcements to let family and friends know about our new arrival. These little cards communicated essential news about the newborn: name, gender, weight, length, etc. Most parents today simply post the news on social media, letting everyone know that a new life has come into the world!

Today’s passage tells us how God made Jesus’ birth announcement, and it is spectacular! Born in a small town and laid in an animal’s feeding trough, God’s Son came quietly into the world. But the night didn’t *stay* quiet! Out in the pastureland near Bethlehem, the silence and deep darkness of night were burst upon by an angelic messenger. This angel announced the Messiah’s birth to a group of shepherds, and Luke’s Gospel tells us that “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (v. 9). The shepherds were told who Jesus was and where they could find Him. Then the angel was joined by the angelic host praising God and filling the heavens with light and glory.

How did the shepherds respond? They left immediately to find the newborn king! May we also seek Him this Christmas and worship Him as the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Father, fill my heart with Christmas joy as I remember who Jesus is and why He came to earth. In Jesus’ name, amen.