

Mighty God  
Isaiah 12:2-6  
Luke 3:7-18  
12/16/18  
Third Sunday of Advent

We continue to explore Isaiah's four titles that are so well known in the English-speaking world. Today we consider Mighty God.

The Christian perspective may see this as a clear reference to Jesus' deity, but it's important to understand Isaiah's perspective. Isaiah was predicting the coming of a fully human messiah. Remember that those four titles are royal in nature. Isaiah is using this and the other titles to proclaim the wonders that God will do through a human king.

The more misunderstood part of the phrase is not the allusion to deity, but the word mighty. Remember two weeks ago we encountered a messiah who, as a wonderful counselor, often gave advice that was counterintuitive. He worked from the edges, from the places where power did not reside. Our wonderful royal counselor is more interested in righteousness and justice than power.

The term "mighty" pushes us in surprising directions, also. The first direction we encounter in our Luke passage. This mighty God of a messiah, is heralded by a wild man who challenges folks. John the Baptist is not your typical Christmas figure. While our culture feeds us a constant diet of Rudolf, Frosty, Christmas lights, and shopping specials, this stinking, rough clothing wearing, strange diet person screams, "Repent! Repent! Repent!" And for good measure we are called a brood of vipers.

Trip Fuller of Homebrewed Christianity reminds us that repentance isn't simply saying, "I'm sorry." Repentance involves a drastic reorientation of our lives.<sup>1</sup> The mighty God starts the reordering of society on a small scale. The mighty God sends a prophet to tell the peasant, the tax collector, the soldier, the temple priest, and everyone else that lives have to change. Relationships have to change. Our closets, our wallets, our bank accounts, our invitation lists for our parties, our Christmas shopping lists have to change.

Turns out this mighty God of a messiah intends to be mighty intrusive. We love the picture of a messiah setting right the injustices of the world, but we find ourselves very resistant to the fact this messiah starts the work right in our own lives. We are faced with this question, "What drastic, life altering, financially significant, relationship restoring changes have I made in my life this Advent season?" None? According to our Advent visitor for today there is a storm of wrath building up and it is headed our way!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://party.us19.list-manage.com/track/click?u=3057b732c62660437f1de8d65&id=ac85ef6490&e=1949ea670a>

The second direction that the word “mighty” pushes us toward is the global. Isaiah’s view spans from horizon to horizon and beyond. “. . . make known his deeds among the nations . . .” “Sing praises to the Lord, . . . let this be known in all the earth.” Bible commentators debate when the different parts of Isaiah were written and even if there is more than one prophet’s words found in the book. But one writer or many, the final version of Isaiah has a strikingly coherent message – the nations are facing judgement, but the nations are also going to be shown great mercy.

Sounds good to us, right? Except we love the idea that all the “bad” nations (you are free to generate your own list) are facing judgment and all the “good” nations (again make your list) are going to receive mercy. But that isn’t what Isaiah tells us. No, this mighty God of a messiah suffers for everyone in humanity. Good people and bad people. Good nations and bad nations. God intends to offer salvation to all people. God intends to lift the veil of death from all humanity. God is spreading a feast of fine food and wine that will feed the world.

The Christian tradition has an early saint who caught sight of this vision of feeding the world and he lived it. I encountered an article about him this week. While some of the historical details about the historical St. Nicholas are hard to pin down, here are a few things attributed to him. This comes from an article by Pete Enns entitled “St. Nicholas Was an Absolute Beast.”

Nicholas was born in the 3rd century in Asia Minor. He used his entire inheritance to help the poor, sick, and children in need. He gave in secret, expecting nothing in return. He attended the Council of Nicea in AD 325. Greatly loved for his faith, compassion, and care, he is venerated in both East and West.

Nicholas saved young women from slavery, protected sailors, spared innocents from execution, provided grain in a famine, and rescued a kidnaped boy.<sup>2</sup>

The original Nicholas was not a gentle, fuzzy kind of person. Purportedly, he slapped Arius at the council of Nicaea when Arius argued that Jesus was not equal in deity to God the Father. Something tells me our list generating and over the top gift buying of the season would get most of us slapped by Nicholas. Sounds much like John the Baptist to me.

St. Nicholas and John the Baptist have a message for us. The joy of this season is not found in the number of gifts we receive, in the number of parties we attend, or in the nostalgic memories this season conjures for us. The joy of this season, the joy of our mighty God comes when we repent and drastically alter our lives. Joy comes when we take seriously the call of Jesus to care for the poor and the broken hearted. Joy comes when we begin working towards a world as described in Mary’s Magnificat. “He has brought down the powerful from

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<sup>2</sup> [https://peteens.com/st-nicholas-was-an-absolute-beast/?fbclid=IwAR1sq0sJ1cIQY5KdOH1VWGTnxRVU7-4FsRbFfLUJoZxZVh\\_plg6i93l39ag](https://peteens.com/st-nicholas-was-an-absolute-beast/?fbclid=IwAR1sq0sJ1cIQY5KdOH1VWGTnxRVU7-4FsRbFfLUJoZxZVh_plg6i93l39ag)

their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

The crowd of witnesses, the church triumphant, surrounds us in this season of Advent. John calls us again to repent. St. Nicholas stands watching as well. How will we respond? Will we respond with repentance and really celebrate the season in a way that really honors the mighty God born in a manger to parents of meager means? Will we help the poor, the sick, the lonely, the heart broken? Will we cease treating our possessions as ours to use as we wish and offer them at the manger for this mighty God to use to help others? Will we repent of the ways we have mistreated those we claim as fellow Christians and really love one another as Christ commanded? Will we seek healing of divisions? Will we expect our political leaders to work for justice in the world? Will we learn to welcome the stranger and care for the refugee?

The judgement warned of by John is not just a future looming event. The calls to repentance are calls to leave aside things that are killing us from the inside. John railed against the poison of greed that not only left others without a coat, but darkened the human heart, tempting humans to believe the ugly lie that there is no such thing as enough. St. Nicholas shed his fortune caring for others out of love for others and out of self-care. He took seriously Jesus’ words that riches are a danger to the very soul. Hiding from the pain of others makes it impossible for God to break through and heal the pain in our own hearts. Erecting walls around our lives to protect ourselves from others only serves to prevent God from getting rid of the hatred in our souls that is dragging us down to fires of hell. We must repent to fully experience the grace of God. Tripp Fuller also made the following assessment. The point of the message about the arrival of God’s reign is not Hurray! everybody gets a participation trophy.<sup>3</sup>

That is a daunting message. There is more work of repentance for me that I can ever hope to accomplish on my own or in the short years of life that I have. John’s shouting and St. Nicholas’ slaps across my face pierce my soul. But who will deliver me? Who will bring me joy? Who will give me the strength to repent? Who will give me the strength to stand against the greed and the hatred and the unwillingness to change that envelops me?

My only hope is that a mighty God has the power to change me. My only hope of learning to proclaim Isaiah’s vision of inclusion to the world is if the voice of this mighty God speaks through me. My only hope of overcoming the hatred in my own heart is if the love of a mighty God who would live among us engulfs me.

And this is the incredibly good news. Isaiah may not have intended his claims to imply deity, but the church recognized that the one heralded by John the Baptist was different from any other human the world had ever seen. St. Nicholas’ passion at the council when he confronted Arius was vital to the church and to every single one of us. Our only hope to respond to the

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<sup>3</sup> <https://party.us19.list-manage.com/track/click?u=3057b732c62660437f1de8d65&id=ac85ef6490&e=1949ea670a>

message of John and follow the example St. Nicholas is to kneel at the manger of a mighty God who is also a mighty savior.

Kneeling there, we will be given the power to repent. Kneeling there we will learn to love those different than us. Kneeling there we will be taught how to proclaim the reign of God that extends to all people. Kneeling there we will find true joy and be overwhelmed by God's love. Kneeling at the manger will change us for there we will meet the mighty God. Amen.