

**Series: Traditions of Christmas**  
**Sermon: Mistletoe**

**Isaiah 2:1-5**

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD."

***A Mistletoe Kinda Day***

I was very shy in school. I was one of those kids who did not gather, nor want, any attention. I would bop along at my own pace and forge my own path. And so, whenever the occasion happened that I would be at the center of attention, my embarrassment level would increase one hundred fold. I remember one of my most embarrassing moments in junior high. I was standing in a doorway at school. And this was in December. What I did not realize was that there was a piece of mistletoe hanging above my head. You know what happens when you stand under mistletoe? I do now! Looking back, I was a fool to not stand underneath there more often, but at the time I was quite surprised and embarrassed. For whatever reason, we kiss under the mistletoe. It is one of the traditions that has remained with us throughout the centuries.

The name mistletoe shows just how sick and twisted that practice is. It's a combination of two Old English words. Mistle and Twi. Twi means twig. And Mistle means droppings. Or doo-doo. Or feces, or...you get the idea. Mistletoe, AKA Poop stick. I'm not making this up! It would spread by bird droppings on branches. Birds would ingest Mistletoe and fly it around to another spot and deposit the plant somewhere else. Mistletoe is a vine that is known as a parasitic plant. It grows by stealing the life out of something else. It doesn't grow out of the ground, but out of another plant. Of all of the parasitic plants out there, Mistletoe is by far the most lovely. It spreads from one plant to the next, from one grove of trees to the next. In the bleakest coldest nights of winter, when everything else seemed to be dying, Mistletoe thrived, offering a splash of green and red in a land void of color. Many centuries before Christmas, Mistletoe was viewed as sacred. The ancients couldn't figure out how it lived, or how to kill it, it seemed to spread as if by magic. They took Mistletoe as God's sign of life. No matter what happens, life will go on. In the old Scandinavian communities, if warriors found themselves under mistletoe hanging from the trees, they would stop their fighting, so they wouldn't offend the God of life. Not only was it a sign of life and peace, but Mistletoe demanded peace from those who were around it. They would hang Mistletoe around a baby's crib, offering it protection. It would hang over houses and barns to protect it from enemies. As things happen, the legend went from generation to generation with some modifications here and there, and now we have the playful tradition of kissing under the mistletoe, offering signs of love and peace under the watchful shadow of the flower of life. They brought in mistletoe because it was a plant that lived in the deepest winter night, despite everything else, it still grew.

During this time of Advent, we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ. We put up decorations, sing favorite

songs, light the candles, and plan our parties and get together on our holiday calendar. We like to celebrate Christmas. But I think we let the cat out of the bag too soon. And I'm just as guilty as anybody. In the olden days, Christmas started at, well Christmas. And the season went to a holiday we call Epiphany, the day we celebrate the wise men finding Jesus, the time when Jesus was made known to the world. Manger to the Wisemen. The time on our Calendar between Christmas and Epiphany is twelve days, hence, the twelve days of Christmas. When we sing the song, we tend to think that it's twelve days before Christmas, but it actually is the twelve days after Christmas. By then, however, the stores are looking forward to Valentines Day. The time before Christmas, however, is the quiet time of reflection and preparation for coming of Christ, and what that means. And each week, we light a candle to show one aspect of the Advent season. Hope, love, peace, joy. I think we have them written around somewhere around here . . . We have hope for the world. Hope is a funny word. How we typically use it is a watered down version of what it really means. We can say that we hope for good weather. We can hope for good fortune. You can hope that this sermon is over half over. I can hope that you haven't fallen asleep yet. We typically use the word hope to mean a casual wish or a desirable outcome. Something that will make us happy or be a benefit for us. Over the years, hope has lost it's edge as to its real meaning. It has turned into something glib or wishful, but what it really means is reliance on a future outcome. Reliance that such and such will happen. If we hope, there is a sense of dependance or urgency. If you have hope in something, you are relying on something to come true. I could say that I hope it's a nice day, but I'm not really relying on it. A farmer could have hope in the weather, and in that case, there is a sense of dependance. To have hope in something is to have a sense of dependance. We can't do it ourselves. We can't depend upon ourselves all the time, we need outside help. Our scripture this morning is definitely a passage about hope. A reliance on a certain outcome.

Isaiah was a prophet around 700 B.C., seven hundred years before Jesus. He lived during tumultuous times in the history of Israel. Rulers came and went, oppression and injustice was rampant, people taking advantage of people at every turn. Wars and pestilence and disease and strife. Isaiah had hope for another day. For another type of life. And the Word of the Lord came to Isaiah. In the Days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. People will come in peace, learn God's commands, instruction shall come from Zion, nation will not lift up the sword against nation, and the art of war shall be forgotten. The people will take their swords and beat them into farm equipment, their spears into pruning hooks, because there shall be no need of weaponry. Yes, this is a very optimistic message that Isaiah testified to, but it is one in which they needed to hear. One of these days, one of these days, we shall all be at peace and there shall be no more tears, no more sorrow, no more war, no more pain. Indeed, Isaiah was a prophet of hope. That Christ might come and offer us peace and love and joy and justice. To show us another way to live, to show us how to be fully human. They needed Christ. They needed to be healed of all the sins that tore them apart. From greed to pride to avarice to selfishness. They needed to hear the message of Christ, to prepare for His coming.

And so do we. We read Isaiah during Advent because of his hope for what the future might be. There are days that we need hope. This year, it seems, more than in recent years. We are at war, we hear of violence in our streets. We have wars and pestilence and disease and strife. I hear a police siren outside and think, oh well. We have fears, we have debts, we have uncertainties. We need Christ during these time as well. We need the hope that Isaiah prophesied. And every year, we share the story of Christ's birth and we hear the familiar words, "Peace on Earth, and Goodwill towards men." That is hope. We need Christ in our lives. Let me ruin a little bit of Christmas for you. We celebrate Christmas on December 25. Unlike Easter, which is a date that floats around a bit, Christmas has been firmly set for centuries. But he wasn't born on December 25. To be honest, we don't have a clue what day he was born on. He could have been born in July for all we know. They didn't record his date of birth, because they didn't do that kind of thing back then. So why do we celebrate it on December 25? Years ago, when the Pope finally decided to have a celebration of Jesus's birth, they looked on

the calendar to see what would be the most appropriate day. And they put it on the darkest day of the year. At that time, the winter solstice landed on December 25. The date where we have the most darkness and the least light. The world would get darker and darker and darker. But on December 25, the darkness would stop its advance and the light would once again take over. In the deepest darkest night, it changes. Light is once again brought back into the world. What a wonderful image for Christmas! Light has come into the world. Darkness will not win. No matter what happens, Christ will always be victorious. Do you need to hear a message of hope today? Darkness will not win! Whatever tough times you face, whatever trials you are going through, in the end, light always comes through. Maybe you're at a place in your life where you think that the darkness in your life is going to take over. Take heart, find courage, because hope is your most powerful ally. Darkness will not win. Guaranteed.

Maybe that's not where you are in your life. Maybe times are going well. Maybe you look around and think, "Hey, we're doing pretty good." We don't need Christ. We're doing just fine, thank you very much. Several years ago I was talking to a guy who had just found out that I was a minister. Generally, I try and keep that secret when meeting new people. It tends to make the conversation a little awkward. Hi, how are you, great. What do you do? Really, wow, neat. What do I do? Oh, I'm a pastor. Oh, I see....some people shut down and the conversation wanes. (Side note, I have two pastor friends, single guys, who would love to find that someone special. If it's hard talking to a pastor, try getting someone to date a pastor. Apparently that's very awkward as well. One of them has given up telling prospective dates that he is a pastor. Now, when a young miss asks about his job, he says that he is the CEO and Administrative officer of a community based non-profit organization that deals with family systems, justice issues and faith based initiatives. It hasn't worked yet.) Anyway, I was talking to this guy who just found out that I am a pastor and he says to me, "I don't need Christ. I'm doing quite well on my own. I said, "Really? What do you mean?" And he responded that he was a good person, he doesn't do anything really really bad, lives by the golden rule so he had no use for Christ whatsoever. I asked, "so you're a good person?" He said, "yeah". And I asked, "By what standard? Who says what is good and what is bad?" And he said that he didn't lie, didn't steal, didn't kill, you know the unethical things. "And who came up with these ethical things?", I asked him. "Who wrote the Golden rule?" We had a nice chat, and it turns out, he was a deeply religious man, but he just didn't know it. I said, "That's who Christ is. Christ is the one who came into the world to show us love, to show us peace, to show us how to find true happiness. Christ is the hope that God will come into the world and show us how to walk in the light." We all need Christ. Christ brings back light into the world and Christ is the Lord of our virtues. No matter who you are, we all need Christ. Just like Mistletoe, in the deepest night, Christ comes forth. This advent season, may we prepare ourselves to have Christ enter our lives and may the saying be true, Peace on earth, and goodwill towards all. Amen.