

ISAIAH 9:6.

For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us,
and the government will be on his shoulders—
and his name will be
Wonderful,
Counselor,
God the Champion,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

“For *me*? You didn’t have to do that!” “For *me*? Aw, you shouldn’t have!”

Perhaps these words, or variants of them, were spoken at your house last night or early this morning. Sometimes they can end up being sort of a joke, with one person in the family always saying them after opening every present. Maybe he says, “You didn’t have to,” maybe he says, “You shouldn’t have,” but he’s always clearly glad that you did.

But the words are more likely to be spoken in all seriousness the more spectacular the present is. “You didn’t have to do that” or “You shouldn’t have” might even be accompanied with tears—tears that express shock, because the recipient knows how much the present cost; tears that express embarrassment, because the recipient knows that the gift he or she gave to the giver is nothing by comparison; tears that express the most deep-seated joy, because the recipient knows that the gift is more than he or she could have ever asked for or dreamed of.

There are words that have echoed in every Christmas celebration down through the years—words like *angels, shepherds, Joseph, Mary, baby, manger, Bethlehem*. But none of those are as important as the two words we just heard, *to us*. “A child is born *to us*, a son is given *to us*.”

These words are more important than any of the others, because if we really take them to heart, if we really understand what we have just received, it results in the most life-changing realizations: *To us?* God didn’t need to. God shouldn’t have. But he did.

1.

God certainly didn’t need to give a child to us. He could, for instance, have given his Son to the plants. After God created them on the third day, he saw that they were good. Every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth, every tree that had fruit with seed in it grew, existed, and provided for man, once God created them, just as God intended.

But that’s not the case anymore, is it? God told Adam after he fell into sin that the ground was now cursed, that it would produce thorns and thistles when man wanted it to produce fruits and vegetables and beautiful greenery. People now have to work hard to get the land to produce what they want. Just try planting a garden. Between weeds and insects and rabbits and deer and drought, we’re fortunate to get anything to grow at all. The whole world, it seems, fights against the plants. In addition, much of what the ground produces is now poisonous to man. There are some fruits and plants that we can’t eat, or we’ll get sick and possibly die.

Yes, because of man’s sin, Paul writes in Romans that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we can almost imagine

what the plants and trees are saying when they groan, “You guys are the ones that messed up, and now we are cursed. Thanks a lot.”

Certainly God could have sent his Son to save the plants if he had wanted to.

Or what about the animals? The Bible tells us that after God created them, he saw that they too were good. And just as the humans apparently ate no meat at first, neither did the animals. God gave them every green plant for food too. That’s not the way it is any more, is it? After mankind fell into sin, many of the animals now had to fight and kill each other for food in order to survive, or they had to be on their guard against those animals and humans who would now fight or kill them. Sometimes even they aren’t able to adapt to the environment around them that used to support them. Land development, changing temperatures, or other circumstances can wipe out an entire species so that it is extinct.

In addition, there are now aberrations among the animals that must lead to a fairly miserable existence until they probably end up on the dinner menu for some other animal. A true albino deer, for example, not only has no pigment in his skin and hair, but also has no pigment in his eyes. So if he is walking in a forest or field with the sun in his face, he often can’t see well. Albino deer have been known to bump into trees accidentally. In the meantime, while he can’t see well, other predatory animals, even with poor eyesight, can see him just fine. It’s no wonder most of us have never seen one; they don’t usually last long.

Animals were the first creatures that God actually spoke to in creation. God even explicitly told the prophet Jonah that he cared about the many domestic animals in the great city of Nineveh. God certainly could have sent his Son to save the animals.

The angels were other creatures God could have saved, and perhaps they would have made the most sense. We don’t know when exactly God created them, but we do know it was sometime during the first six days of creation. They are awesome, magnificent creatures, not only in appearance, which has caused most of the mortals who have seen them to be afraid, but also in ability. They can move from place to place just like that. They can assume different shapes and forms just like that. And all of them were originally good.

At first. Not any more. Sometime between the seventh day of the very first week and when the serpent came to Eve, a sizeable number of the angels rebelled against God. They were led by a powerful angel called Satan, but of course they could not win. God cast them out of heaven to be bound in everlasting chains for the day of judgment.

Certainly no one in his right mind would have thought it a bad idea for God to assume angelic nature in order to rescue the angels so that these many powerful beings who had deserted him could once again use their abilities in his service and to his glory.

But peer into the manger, folks. That is not a plant sprout in the hay. That is no animal nursing at his mother’s breast. That is no angel crying in discomfort. That is a child, a human child, just like any other child, just like you and me when we were children. Mary clothes him, feeds him, burps him, changes his soiled strips of cloth. In fact through Mary’s own diet which serves to feed the child, he is nourished by nutrients from the dead plants and animals he could have saved if he had wanted to. But he didn’t want to.

“A child is born *to us*.”

A story even older than Martin Luther goes that the devil walked into church once and took a place among the people. They came to part in the Creed where they sang about God’s Son

being conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, and becoming truly human. The devil looked around and was dumbfounded at the expressions on people's faces. They were just *reciting* it! Some were looking around, some looked sleepy, and *nobody fell to their knees*. So the devil turned and smacked the guy next to him right in the chops and said, "You worthless, rotten ingrate! Aren't you ashamed at all to stand there like a stick and not fall on your knees out of sheer joy? If God's Son had become *our* brother as he has become *yours*, we would not know how to contain ourselves with all our joy!"

Of course the story is made up. The devil would not rebuke anyone for not appreciating Christmas. But it well illustrates the tremendous honor we take for granted—that a child is born to *us* and not to the plants, animals, or angels.

2.

That story also illustrates the other surprise about this child's birth. God not only didn't need to. He shouldn't have, at least not according to our reasoning, not when we consider who we are. For who are the *us* in "*To us* a child is born"? What are we humans? We differentiate ourselves from the plants, animals, and angels, but what makes us different? How do we classify ourselves?

Philosophers and scientists like to classify humans by comparing them with the animals. Long before Charles Darwin, philosophers were classifying humans as animals. Some said, "The human is a laughing animal"—making laughter what supposedly set us apart. Others said, "The human is a featherless biped," that is, he is an animal that walks on two legs and doesn't have feathers. But they usually settled on, "The human is a rational animal." I remember that, even growing up attending a Lutheran grade school, our science textbook classified us humans as mammals, the same as the cows and pigs. And all of these definitions certainly make us look pretty special, don't they?

We're not fat, hungry, snorting, dirty pigs. We're not slow, boring, cud-chewing cows. We're not tail-chasing, butt-sniffing, slobbering dogs. We're not dumb, braying, stubborn donkeys. Animals go about hunched over, eating off the ground, communicating in grunts, groans, barks, and other monosyllabic noises.

But not us. We walk about proud and upright, thoughtfully analyzing and reacting to our surroundings, communicating with each other using complex gestures, words, sentences, and languages. *Sometimes* we even help someone weaker than we are to survive and even thrive, where an animal probably would have torn a weaker animal to shreds.

But our reason is not what primarily sets us apart from the animals. Nor is our stature. Nor our communication. What primarily sets us apart from the animals is that God himself hand-formed us from the dust of the earth in his own image. Our reason, emotions, and will were created in complete harmony with God's own. So if we want to classify ourselves correctly, if we want to know who Isaiah's *us* is, we shouldn't be comparing ourselves down below to the animals, but up above to God.

We don't look so hot then, do we? For although God created us in his image, only the shell of that image remains. The guts have been lost. God is holy, righteous, truthful. We are sinful, wicked, deceitful. God is gracious and kind. We are irritable and selfish. We grumble and complain. God is perfectly happy and content. We think we would be too if we had everything

God did, but the more we get, the less content we are. We always think we should be better off than what we are.

Sure, sometimes we help those who are weaker to survive. But that's just it—we are more likely to help those *out there*, the poor and hungry as a class, people we don't personally know. Whereas the people closest to us, the people we should love the most and treat the best—our boss and employees, our neighbors and fellow Christians, our husband, our wife, our children—those we more often treat like scum.

Yes, we could very well take note that we are worse than the animals. For God did not create the animals with moral sense or responsibility. He created *us* with such sense and gave us a conscience to know right from wrong, and what do we do? We choose to do what angers him. Even when we choose to do what is good, we do so because it's what suits *us* and makes *us* feel good, not because it's what suits *God* and pleases *him*, as if *we* were the geniuses who thought of what was right all by ourselves. This is even more deplorable to God than simply doing wrong.

And what's even worse is that by nature we resent the fact that God is good. You would think that as such wretches, it would be like an oasis to find anyone good, but when we encounter God, the purest, highest good, we want nothing to do with him, or little to do with him, perhaps only a few times a year. We think we're fine without him.

Or we might associate with him, but only from a distance. We say, "Oh, I believe." But we are lying. We are lying if church isn't some place we want to be. We are lying if our Bibles continue to be unused at home. Because truly to believe in God is to know how good he is, and if we knew how good he is, we would desire nothing more than to spend all our days in his company.

And this doesn't just apply to you. Isaiah says "to *us*." Isaiah is a prophet of God. Yet he includes himself. He needs the child just as much as everyone else does. So do I as your pastor, even more than you do.

And what do we see, friends? Peer into the manger. You all have names like John, Jim, Brad, Mary, Sharon, and Karen, because your parents didn't know anyone by that name who was a jerk. They didn't have any negative associations with that name, otherwise they wouldn't have chosen it for you. But look at the child! He has *hands*! Hands that once stretched out to take forbidden fruit, that have been used so often in public and in private for sin. He has *feet*! Feet that were once used to run away from God in a garden, that have been used so often over thousands of years to go places one should not go. He has a *mouth*! The same human mouth that once tried to pass the blame onto others, even onto God, the mouth that has been so insulting to others. He has *eyes*! Eyes that once lusted for what God had forbidden, eyes that have scanned images and people in a way they ought not. He has a human *brain* and *heart*! A brain and heart that have been used so often to harbor every sort of evil thought and covetous desire.

All these organs and parts should be repulsive to the child, but he gladly takes them. Yes, he will gladly subject them to our sin, so that he can bleed and die and completely remove that sin from his sight once and for all. For there is only one difference between the child and you and me: He has no sin. He has no sin so that he might use his human body to be your perfect human substitute and sacrifice under God's holy law.

3.

To *us*, to *us* the child is born! Why? God didn't need to. God shouldn't have. So why? Because God is a true giver. "A son is *given* to us." To give means to freely present someone with something, for free and without any cost. Not because the person is attractive. Not because the person has given or is going to give to you. Not because it's that time of the year and everyone else is giving too. Not even because you want to see the recipient's reaction. But just because. God gives just because he is good, because that's just who he is.

He gives to *us*. And that means he gives to *you*. Lest you think God means someone else, listen to his called servant speaking to you from this pulpit today. He has called me here to tell *you*, each one of you, that he is not against you, that he loves you dearly, that this child, his Son, was born for *you*. The splash of water administered by his called servant in your baptism was not splashed on your parents or splashed on the ground. It was splashed on *your* head in the name of this child. His body and blood in the bread and wine of Communion that many of you receive here at his altar and have received throughout your life were not and will not be placed on anyone else's lips but *yours*. To *you* he is born, to *you* he is given.

And since he has been born to *you*, since he died for *you*, since he has his word preached to *you* and his sacraments administered to *you*, that means that when your body slumps over in death, it is *your* soul that Jesus will carry to himself with arms that are no longer a child's, but those of a strong man, those of the almighty God, sitting at God's own right hand. And when he comes to judge the living and the dead, he will come for *you* and will take *you* to be with him forever.

So when Satan comes your way and tries to get between you and Jesus, tries to make you grumpy and angry, lustful and discontent, tries to upset your peace and joy, tries to hold your sins in front of your face and plague you with guilt, grab the prophet Isaiah and stick him between yourself and the devil and say, "Haven't you heard, you worthless, lousy monster? A child has been born."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," he'll say.

"Yes, but have you heard what else? He is born *to us*, he is given *to me*, and he is born to defeat and crush you. Now get out of my face!"

And once he leaves—and he will have to—there will be nothing standing between you and the child. So you can go over and look at him and pick him up in the arms of your faith. He is *yours*, after all. And you can marvel at him and smile and laugh and say to yourself, "O God my God, you didn't need to. And you shouldn't have. But I'm so very glad you did. Thank you."

And he will say, as he does not just today, but every day: "It was my pleasure. Merry Christmas." Amen.