

Christmas Gifts  
Isaiah 41:21-42:13

So, what do you want for Christmas? That's another way of asking, "What is valuable to you?" Maybe you want candidates and Congressmen to stop misbehaving or maybe you want the President to stop tweeting, or maybe you want all these FBI investigations to just go away. On a more serious note, maybe you want the fires to go out in Southern California, and for some rain to fall in Northeast Brazil. Closer to home, maybe you want some quality time with the ones you love most. Maybe you want health for yourself or your loved ones, or for strained family relationships to be restored. And perhaps there is a special something you'd like for someone to put under your tree. What is important to you? Who or what do you think would make you happy during this Christmas season?

We need to think about it, for the question of what is worth the most to us, the question of worthiness is bound up with the concept of worship – the two words even come from the same root. Whatever we value, whatever we think will give us meaning or happiness or fulfillment in life – that's really what we worship.

And when we look at worship this way, don't we all worship many gods? Oh, we don't bow down before molten images, the way 41:29 describes those ancient people and their idols, but aren't there are all sorts of things that we think would make us happy? Aren't there lots of things that we think would make life perfect if we could just find them under the tree on Christmas morning?

God's ancient people certainly had great desires, great needs. The ancient people of Israel, in exile in Babylon, looked forward to the time when someone would destroy the Babylonians and allow them to return to their homeland. And 41:25 tells about a mighty conqueror who will come from the north to do just that, one whom Isaiah later reveals to be Cyrus, the King of Persia. Cyrus thus embodied their longing for justice and righteousness to be restored.

And at the time of Jesus, the people were still looking for a similar savior, their Messiah. They looked at 42:13, and waited for the day when God's power would be unleashed on all His enemies, on all the forces of wickedness in the world. They longed for a time when the idol-worshipping Romans would be defeated and the Israelites would once again have the political independence they had enjoyed in the days of King David.

Yes, they were longing for good things, for great things, for peace and justice and righteousness. But somehow, when the One Who would bring all those things to them showed up,

the Israelites didn't recognize Him. They were too busy looking for the gifts He would bring to recognize the Giver.

And it's all too easy for us to fall into the same trap. For whenever we shift our focus to anything in creation instead of God, even to good and great things that He has promised us, we are really turning away from our Creator. Whenever we shift our focus from the Giver to the gifts, however valuable those gifts may be, we are actually bowing down before idols, whether we know it or not.

So, how can we tell if the thing we are worshipping has become an idol to us? Let's go back to our Christmas list. What do you want the most? What is the most important thing or person or condition or situation to you right now? What do you think would make you happy if you had it? Whatever it is, give it a name – "Health," or "Comfort," "Financial Security," or "Sobriety," "Peace," or "Justice."

Now, imagine that you can ask that thing the sorts of questions that God asks in 41:21-23. "Present your case. Declare to us what is going to take place. Tell us about what has already happened so that we can understand it. Do good or evil. Do something!"

Well how about it? Can any of those things we value so highly predict the future? Can health or comfort or freedom or peace or justice really make sense out of our world? Indeed, during times when we as individuals or as a society may have had those things, could we even hold on to them? Did those things even have the power to perpetuate themselves? If so, why do we still miss them and long for them today?

No, if we are honest with ourselves, and if we are honest about those things that we worship, we will say about them what God says in 41:29 – however valuable they are to us, they are really false hopes. They are powerless, their works are worthless, as empty as the wind.

Do you want something real? Do you want someone who really can solve your problems and bring meaning to your life? Look at 42:5 – now there's Someone to worship. God is the One Who stretched out the heavens, the infinite expanses of the universe the way a Boy Scout might pitch a tent. God is the One Who spread forth the whole earth, shaping its mountains and hammering out its valleys and oceans the way a blacksmith might forge a lump of iron. And, perhaps more to the point, God is the One Who gives breath to everyone living on the earth, even to those who worship other gods, even to those don't want to have anything to do with Him.

But God is not only powerful – He is also sovereign. Verse 9 reminds us that God was not only in control of all the past events of history. He is not only the Only One Who can really make

sense out of all the chaotic things in our lives. He is also the only One Who can declare new things, announcing future events even before they happen.

And one of the things that God announced in this very passage, in 42:1-4, is the thing that we celebrate during this season of the year – the coming of God's Messiah, the Servant of God, the elect, the Chosen One of God, the One Who would have the Spirit of God upon Him and within Him in a special way. We celebrate the coming of the One Who came to bring justice to all the nations, the One for Whom His people had been waiting for some 700 years from the time of Isaiah to the time of Jesus' birth.

But this Messiah did not come in the way that His people expected Him to, swooping in from the north like Cyrus had done, going forth like a warrior as 42:13 says. Instead he would be born to a couple of obscure travelers who were so poor that Jesus had to spend His first night on earth in a barn.

And this Messiah would not do the sorts of things His people expected Him to do. He didn't prevail against His enemies through military might the way Cyrus had done. Jesus didn't try to lead His people in revolution against the Romans, even though many of them wanted Him to.

But He did fulfill Isaiah's prophecy, doing exactly what 42:2 and 3 say. He would come in a gentle way, not breaking even a bruised reed, not even blowing out a feebly smoldering flame. That is the miracle we celebrate during this Christmas season – that the Son of God, love's pure light would shine into this world on a silent night, that the Lord of all the universe would enter this world as a babe, the Son of Mary.

But what is perhaps even more amazing, this baby was born to do exactly what Isaiah said He would do – to bring forth justice. This long-awaited Messiah did indeed come to give His people what they most dearly desired, but once again in a way they never expected. Yes, as 42:1 says, He came to bring justice to the Gentiles, but not by smashing His enemies in the way that Cyrus had done. Yes, as verse 4 says, he would come to establish God's justice throughout the whole world, but not through military conquest.

Instead, as verse 6 says, he would come as a light to the nations, to open the blind eyes of the Gentiles, to bring them out of the prison of their idolatry and to bring them into His kingdom. He would come to transform their desires so that the islands, the coastlands, the places that even wicked pagans like the Philistines lived would wait expectantly for His law.

And that is the good news for all of us today, whether Jew or Gentile, whether we have grown up in the Church or whether we don't know very much about the Bible: Jesus didn't come into the world to blast His enemies, but to save them – to save us from our sins. He came to be,

as 42:6 says, a covenant to the people, to be the fullest expression of God's love for us, to offer Himself up as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He is the Greatest Christmas Gift of all, the only One Who can truly fulfill all our needs, the only One Who can truly satisfy all our desires.

But here's the catch – we must accept Him as He is, on His own terms. Remember, many of the people who saw Jesus were so busy looking for a Messiah Who would come in a different way and Who would do different things that they didn't recognize the real Messiah when He showed up. They were so wrapped up in what they wanted that they missed the much greater blessing God had for them in Jesus Christ.

In the same way, we can get too wrapped up in our own desires, longing for some of God's good gifts. And this preoccupation, this idolatry can cause us to miss out on God's greatest gift. Jesus may be trying to reveal Himself to us, to show His love to us in a different way, and we need to be open to that. We need to accept Him on His terms, acknowledging His sovereign power, and embracing His gracious love.

For the good news is that the One Who came to us as a baby in a manger would come as a warrior, just as 42:13 predicted. But He would prevail over all His foes, even sin and death itself, not as a cruel conqueror, but by taking up His cross. It is this Jesus, the Lord's Messiah, Who rose from the dead and Who reigns even now over the world He created, Who is in charge even of the most terrible, difficult situations in every one of our lives.

No, Jesus isn't Someone we can really understand. But he is worthy of our worship. And so let's join our voices with all of His people, even those nomads of Kedar in the Arabian desert, even the isles where the Philistines lived, and let's sing to the Lord a new song. Let's turn away from whatever idols we are worshipping, and give glory to the Lord instead. Let's give praise to our creator and redeemer, our promised Messiah and our reigning King as we join our voices with those of the angels and the shepherds and the wise men, singing all the stanzas of "Angels from the Realms of Glory."