

**“I Didn’t Know, but I Did Trust”
(A Dramatic Sermon)
Isaiah 9:2–7; Luke 2:1–20
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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(singing) “Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come, born a Jew, come to make all things new, bear his people’s burden, freely love and pardon. Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring! Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing! When he comes, when he comes, who will make him welcome?”

Long ago, prophets knew... really? Which prophets? Maybe Micah or Zephaniah, but not me, I didn’t know, and I like to think I had a reasonably important ministry. I was one of the Major Prophets. I mean, you have heard of Isaiah? When telling the story of Jesus, your Gospel writers reference my words many times. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were slightly wordier than me, but I don’t think a word count alone determines the value of a prophet. Tell that to your preacher some time!

But I think I was a prophet of some significance and I did not know that God was going to enter this world as a fragile child and, through the life, death and resurrection of this child, offer salvation to the whole world. Believe me, I didn’t know!

In fact, it would have been odd if I did. The role of the prophet is not to predict the future, certainly not 700 years into the future! It is to inform people about what God thinks of how they are living now so that they can make any changes needed. How people respond to God’s truth affects the future, and words of prophecy can have layers of meaning, slightly different messages for different times, but what kind of prophet would ignore the needs of people in his/her own time? What kind of God would demonstrate such a profound lack of concern?

I did not know Christ would come. I only knew we needed help in the worst way. There were internal problems in the nation at the time — moral problems, spiritual problems, strategic problems. You don’t have any of these, do you? And a great threat loomed to the north, the Assyrians who had already taken the northern kingdom. We could

easily be next and there was no reason to think God would protect us, though there are always people who think God will. They don't need a reason, other than their own arrogance.

But we needed help in the way of new leadership to provide a whole new manner of being. I trusted God to provide leadership because God had always provided help in the past, not always protection from harm, but help. And then, God gave me this word to proclaim — I cannot explain exactly how — but God gave me this word.

The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. God has multiplied the nation and increased its joy. God has broken the rod of the oppressor. But it is not time to rub our enemy's nose in the dirt. Our joy is our plunder, our reward. We are to celebrate with peace, not more violence. For a child has been born for us, a great leader who has authority. He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. In other words, this new leader will have the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David, the vision of Deborah, and the perseverance of Moses!

It sounds like something you might hear during a political campaign... Who might this leader be? Hezekiah was the king who came closest in my time, though he was not perfect. No one person could be all of these things. The qualities were what we needed — wisdom, strength, kindness, a relentless yearning for peace. And God was the source of these gifts. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this, I said, the zeal... *qin'a* in the Hebrew, often translated as jealousy or envy, but here in a positive sense — passion! God's passionate concern for God's people would bring what was needed most.

I trusted God for this. I didn't know exactly how God would do it, and I certainly didn't know what God would do hundreds of years later in Bethlehem, and how my word would apply to this leader who could fulfill it completely. But apparently God did know. The God whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways, the God who is beyond all time and space yet willing to enter time and space for us, God knew what would ultimately happen.

This same God knows what will happen in your time, and you can trust that it will be good. You have your own needs. Some of you are

barely keeping it together. You've put on a good show during this sacred season, but inside grief is tearing you apart... You've processed all the medical information and made sound logical choices, but fear eats at you inside no matter how strong your faith. Whatever happens in the next life, this life matters; the people you love, the things you still want to do, the things you feel called to do — it all matters... You've kept your chin up, even when you got disappointing news, even when you started asking questions, even when you began to wonder what you believe, but now it just seems like too much... You need help in the worst way.

But so does the world around you. You have been living with this pandemic for nearly two years now. Aren't you tired of it, bone-tired? You're weary with all the limitations; but your children are even more weary with all the challenges of learning and development; medical professionals are exhausted; and the families who have lost loved ones — over 5.3 million so far and over 800,000 in your country alone, the most of any nation in the world — well, they are just devastated.

One would have thought that with all of your advances, especially medical advances, you would have had this under control by now. If this pandemic is a test for how you might fare with a more deadly disease, as many of your public health people think, you may not have passed — I don't mean *you* personally, but *you* as a nation and a world. You need help, not in terms of medical advances, but in human advances, in putting aside your petty disagreements so that you can work together on things that require you to work together.

But, of course, it's not just the pandemic that troubles you. There are so many other challenges. You don't have any threat like the Assyrians looming, a political and military entity more powerful than you. But the world is full of poverty and violence; your nation is torn apart by social, economic and political tensions; your leaders can't address the most pressing problems because they are more loyal to their parties than the common good. You need help in the worst way.

You are walking in darkness. You need a great light to shine on your path so you can find a way out of this wilderness. You need the

wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David, the vision of Deborah, and the perseverance of Moses!

And while I have said no one person can embody all of these qualities, I mean to say that no ordinary person can. But this one child who has been born for us, well past my time and beyond my prophetic imagination, he comes mighty close. In some ways, he is quite ordinary. He is born to an unwed mother in an animal shed in the little town of Bethlehem. But in other ways, he is not ordinary at all.

He teaches as one with authority and heals every kind of disease. He welcomes everyone with compassion and forgives even those who put him to death on a cross. He offers kindness to the poor and needy, sight to the blind, strength for the lame, and love for everyone, even the enemy. He doesn't run for office, he has no interest in worldly power, yet he brings salvation for all people and makes a way for peace within people and among nations. He fulfills my prophecy in ways I could never have imagined!

Does this mean he is the answer to your every need — personal, social and political? You will have to answer that question for yourself. I didn't know Christ would come, but I did trust that God would help my people. You do know Christ has come. Can you trust that God will help you in some way through him?

God can be trusted. That is not in question. Can you trust in God? On this night when the angels are singing and the shepherds are acting in faith, when Mary is treasuring their words and pondering them in her heart, can you trust in God? Without knowing everything you'd like to know, can you just trust this once? That is the question, and the answer, because if you can, God will provide what you need most.

(singing) "Journey ends! Where afar Bethlehem shines, like a star, stable door stands ajar: unborn son of Mary, Savior, do not tarry! Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring! Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing! When he comes, when he comes, we will make him welcome!"