

**SNOW—THE PICTURE OF PURITY****Isaiah 1:16-18, 1 John 3:3-10****(Read 1 John 3:3-10)**

**Intro:** Our Advent study is redeeming the symbols of Christmas. Two weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, Jeffrey talked about food and feasting, and of abundance, and need. Last week I talked about evergreen, and I showed how it is a picture of the everlasting covenant God has with his people. Next week we will be talking about light. Christmas lights, Christmas stars, and all the things that brighten the season. This week we are talking about snow by showing how it is a picture of the purity Jesus came to bring to humanity.

Now these are all basically Western symbols. I was discussing this with Oswald this past Monday. For his culture in Zambia, a decorated pine tree is probably not something that is very familiar. We also know that Southern Africa has been struggling with a near famine, brought about by a prolonged drought and a resulting crop failure. Thus, feasting is probably not as much of a cultural event at Christmas there, although I think that it is to some extent, and, if there is a symbol that crosses cultural lines, it would certainly be that of a Christmas feast.

We also discussed that Zambians have little or no concept of what it means to dream of a white Christmas. This is for two reasons, one is that it doesn't snow in Zambia. Yes, in the winter time temperatures there do get very chilly, well for them anyway. Average nighttime temperatures in the area where Oswald lives is about 52° F. They are close enough to the equator that snow is not something that would be familiar to a Zambian unless he or she has visited a colder climate and experienced it there. Another huge reason a white Christmas is foreign to a Zambian, and indeed anyone south of the equator, is that Christmas, December 25th, **IS NOT IN THE WINTER TIME** – it's late Spring there! So an obvious thing is that we are talking about symbols that are generally Western and, when one really considers it, sentimental North American characteristics of Christmas.

So how is snow a Christmas thing? For North Americans and Europeans December 25th falls in winter, and for many, but not all, there is snow on the ground.

Clement Moore's famous poem A VISIT FROM ST. NICHOLAS which we often simply refer to as THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS, is where we find one of the first places we see snow in a Christmas setting. In fact, many believe that Moore's poem, and also Dickens' A CHRISTMAS CAROL exactly twenty years later, were what revived the celebration of Christmas for the Western Church. So when Moore wrote . . .

*When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,  
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.  
Away to the window I flew like a flash,  
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.  
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow,  
Gave a lustre of midday to objects below,*

. . . and with that snow became synonymous with Christmas. Then in World War II, I'M DREAMING OF A WHITE CHRISTMAS became very popular. The song was written before the war by Irving Berlin but became a favorite especially when soldiers, especially those in foxholes in the South Pacific, dreamed of Christmas back home. It was steamy and dangerous where they were as they battled the Japanese, but the image in their mind's eye was peaceful and beautiful as they thought of snow, and mistletoe and presents on the tree.

And then there were *sleigh bells jingling, ring tingle tingling too* and any number of songs solidifying that snow would become a symbol of Christmas here in the northern hemisphere, even though a large part of the world doesn't know what we mean by it.

So how do we redeem it? Well, it's not very difficult – because snow is a vivid and almost blinding picture of purity. The Isaiah passage that the Nowakowski's read to us earlier as they lit the candle talks about sin becoming white as snow. And the text from First John 3 that I read as I began this talk tells us unabashedly that *You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.* 1 John 3:5. We celebrate the arrival of Jesus into humanity at Christmas and one of the major reasons we celebrate is . . .

**Jesus came to make us pure**

- The same passage from The Message says, *Surely you know that Christ showed up in order to get rid of sin. There's no sin in him, and sin is not part of his program.* And then it continues with this, *No one who lives deeply in Christ makes a practice of sin. None of those who do practice sin have taken a good look at Christ. They've gotten him all backwards.* 1 John 3:5-6 (The Message). Sin is dirty. Staying away from sin is to be pure, like snow.
- In the first three verses of 1 John 3, the apostle points out the great love that God the father has given us that we can be called his children. And that as his children we need to purify ourselves.
- This message of grace is what God is giving to his people through the prophet Isaiah. He's telling them to wash themselves and make themselves clean. Eugene Peterson paraphrases the passage like this – after slamming them with *Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your trivial religious games* Isaiah 1:13, he offers them another chance with,  
*Go home and wash up.  
Clean up your act.  
Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings  
so I don't have to look at them any longer.  
Say no to wrong.  
Learn to do good.  
Work for justice.  
Help the down-and-out.  
Stand up for the homeless.  
Go to bat for the defenseless.* Isaiah 1:16-17 (The Message)
- David Guzik writes, *“The corruption of Judah's leaders and people was shown in their bad treatment of one another. The leaders and people of Judah wanted to say they loved God by their religious ceremonies, but the LORD cared more about how they treated other people, especially the weak (the fatherless...the widow)”*.
- Sin comes in all shapes and forms. It's not just what other people do and we judge them for it, it is also what WE do. Here's another thought, sin is often what we don't do. We need to ponder deeply that sin is also those times when we turn the other way in the face of injustice. God is telling us to wash ourselves so that our sins are as white as snow and as red as crimson – covered by the blood of a worthy sacrifice.
- Jesus came to be that worthy sacrifice. As a matter of fact. . .

### **The very purpose of Jesus's incarnation was make our victory over sin possible**

- What's that word I just used, incarnation? I Googled ***“simple definition of incarnation”*** and this is the AI response I received, and it's accurate: “Incarnation, central Christian doctrine that God became flesh, that God assumed a human nature and became a man in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity.” Preach it! That's exactly it! And it's why Christmas is actually a most wonderful time of the year. It set into motion the beginning of the final act of God's plan to rescue humanity. He sent his pure as snow son into the cesspool of lost humanity to make us pure as snow too. John the Baptist saw his cousin, Jesus, coming toward him and he burst out, *“Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* John 1:29b (NLT).
- It was exactly as the angel told Joseph in his dream – the son his wife would deliver would come to take away our sins. Here's exactly what Gabriel said: *She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.* Matthew 1:21.
- Isaiah told us to wash ourselves, but, truthfully, overcoming sin on our own is impossible. The temptation to obey ourselves rather than obeying God is too strong and we need Jesus to help us with the process.
- William Barclay writes, *“As long as we remember the continual presence of Jesus, we will not sin; it is when we forget that presence that we sin and to sin is to bring back what he came into the world to abolish.”* Guzik writes this, *“Note the purpose of Jesus: to destroy the works of the devil. Not to neutralize them, not to alleviate them, or not to limit them. Jesus wants to destroy the works of the devil!”* Jesus came in to the world to abolish the work of Satan. Jesus's arrival, his sacrifice, and his resurrection have broken the power of the evil one and his victory means, that by his help we can have victory too.

- In fact, John tells us . . .

**Everyone who has this hope of victory in Christ purifies himself**

- Edward McDowell writes, “*The true believer practices righteousness, while the sinner practices sin—it is as simple as that. The criterion for righteousness is the righteousness practiced by Jesus.*” Our prayer is found in the words of the hymn writer that you see on your worship folder:

*Lord Jesus, look down from Thy throne in the skies,*

*And help me to make a complete sacrifice;*

*I give up myself, and whatever I know,*

*Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.* John Nicholson

- As we live in this hope we look forward to our eternal destiny as we seek to purify our lives. Guzik tells us, “*When we know our end is to be more like Jesus, it makes us want to be more like Jesus right now.*”

**Conclusion:** Our Christmas symbol needs little redeeming since it’s very apropos for the Christian journey. Snow signifies purity. Purity signifies being free from sin.

How do we do that? Here are some things to remember:

- First and foremost, love and righteousness are each most perfectly exhibited in the nature of Jesus. He was both righteous, and completely loving. That is why I often tell us to go and be Jesus to the world. What I mean is to go and live out the nature of Jesus.
- I said it earlier and I’ll say it again, sin comes in all shapes and forms. Paul tells us in Philippians (which will be my next sermon series, by the way, beginning on the second Sunday of January) that we are to . . . *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling* Philippians 2:12b. That means we must never stroll through our walk with Jesus assuming everything is okay. Staying pure is to be alert.
- Purity means not making excuses for sin. Sin is not a mistake – its sin. Sin is not just a little thing – its sin. Sin is not okay because everyone is doing it – its sin.
- At the same time, sinless perfection was only ever possible for one human being in all of history – and he died on the Cross for our sin, and rose again so that we can be victorious over that same sin. So, we will sin – because we are human, but as John assures us, *No one born of God makes a practice of sinning* 1 John 3:9a. John Wesley said that as we grow in Christ and into his holiness we no longer had a bent to sinning. It just doesn’t have the appeal it had before we experienced the purity we have in Jesus Christ.
- That purity makes us whiter than snow. In fact, it’s the very picture of purity. Amen.