

The day after Thanksgiving, we decorated our house for Christmas. We pulled the tree upstairs from the basement closet where it resides. We put it all together, we hung the ornaments on it. We are a one tree family. So our ornaments include the ones I grew up with and received from my grandparents each year. The crafty ones I made at school. And now they include the ones my children get from their grandparents and the ones they make at school. It's a colorful collection filled with memories that we retell each year as we hang our ornaments.

[When I was growing up we'd go see the huge fancy tree at the famous Hotel del Coronado in San Diego. They decorated a tree that went up 3 stories in the lobby of the hotel. Each year it had a theme. One of my favorites was when it was decorated with Nutcrackers. It was nothing like our tree at home, and each year was more spectacular than the next. And as I was reading this passage from Isaiah this week, I just couldn't help but thinking what would it be like if Isaiah had themed tree...

That would be the craziest Christmas tree ever made.

Lord I know that you would come down you would tear the heavens open

So we've got storms - maybe we got we had clouds and thunder and lightning, it seems like the world is falling apart above us.

When you come down the mountains quake

Wouldn't that be a nice needlepoint scene - earthquakes and mountains crumbling into the sea, swallowed up in the ground.

Our righteousness is like a menstrual rag...

That's some pretty intense tinsel.

And then, I imagine the tree topper comes from the image at the end of Isaiah's prophecy: *our house, our glorious house is destroyed in fire*

I have an image of just a tower sitting on top of the tree with cellophane flames crackling all around it. Merry Christmas everybody!

Why do we read Isaiah at Advent and Christmas? Isaiah is the great prophet of preparation - we quote him all the time during the season, and we oftentimes use the more hopeful parts of the put the passages from Isaiah. In other years as we get ready for Christmas, we hear from the parts were Isaiah tells us that we are awaiting one who will be called by the Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father the Prince of Peace.

But in today's passage, Isaiah's preparation looks very different, Isaiah prepares us for the savior by reminding us that everything is not okay. This is so different than how we usually prepare for Christmas - we usually prepare by trying to make everything look as if it is the most OK it has ever been!

I'm not casting stones here; I'm looking at myself on this one. I think that my house is going to be ready for Christmas when there's a place for everything and everything is in its place. I feel like my house is ready for Christmas when it is ready for guests to come. A fragrant wreath of greenery decorates the front door, the mantle is hung with stockings, and the Christmas tree has all the lights on carefully and perfectly. That's when I am ready for Christmas, but Isaiah in essence says, "We are ready, Lord, because we are falling apart. We are ready for you, and we know that we are ready because the world is going up in flames! We need you so badly that even if you cause an earthquake we are okay with it - just please, Lord, come quickly! Come and make this place your home."

We often tell the story around the time of Christmas about how it was that Jesus came into the world, and the world wasn't ready for him. We hear all the stories - how his parents go to

the city of Bethlehem, and they find that there is no room for them in the inn or the guesthouse, or however you want to translate it - there's no spot for them in Bethlehem. We tell how wise men come to King Herod and say, "Where is this new King and Savior that is born?" and King Herod is not ready. Herod sends them on as his spies because he wants to do away with this new threat.

And we seem to think that our job every Christmas is to prove that we are not making the same mistake. We think we're gonna get it right. We think there's no way we would ever miss Jesus, we're gonna roll out the purple carpet; we'll have everything ready for you Jesus. We will build a picture-perfect scene where the only thing missing is that baby in the manger, and then when he comes softly, slowly, backlit as he floats down from heaven - Jesus will find a soft landing because we lined the manger with the softest, pest-free synthetic hay. We aren't like those 1st Century failures. We will be ready.

But Isaiah keeps saying the best way to be ready is to know how *unready* we are. The best way to be ready is to know how badly we need a Savior. But we spend most of our Advent and Christmas trying to prove our home doesn't need one.

In Isaiah's time, Jerusalem was the spiritual home of the people of Israel. At least once a year, all the people of Israel expected to go up to Jerusalem — and that's how they always refer to it, "We are going up to Jerusalem." In the Hebrew language, Jerusalem had such an exalted place in people's minds but it was always up. No matter if you're coming from the north or from the south, or the east of the west - you still have to go "up" to get to Jerusalem. It didn't matter if you lived in the high lands on top of a mountain that was much higher than the Mount Zion where the Temple was built — you are still going "up."

But Isaiah looks up and he says that our holy house, the temple on that mountain, is in ruins; it is burned with fire. Isaiah says we can't go up there anymore, and even if we do, there's nothing for us. And so, and now Isaiah says "Lord, oh that you would come down! Oh that you would tear open the heavens! We've given up on getting up there to you God; our only hope is for you to come down. We are not going to be ready for you."

John tells us in chapter 1 that in Jesus Christ, "the Word became flesh and he made his home among us." We can't go up to him, so he made his home among us. John then goes on to say that "Christ came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." It used to be when I read that passage, that I thought it meant most people just hated Jesus. They thought they were better off without him. But the longer I live, and the more I talk to people about their faith and their struggles, the more I come to discover that for at least as many people as there are who reject Jesus outright, there is an equal number who won't receive him because they think they're not ready.

"Oh Jesus, I would love for you to come by, let's break bread together! Just gimme couple weeks - I'm going to get my home together, get all the decorations in the right place. If we are going to do this, we are going to do it up right!" Jesus is knocking, and we say, "Give me just a moment." But the moment becomes two weeks, and then a month, and Jesus is still at the door, and we are still tidying up. The old spiritual says, "Every time I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray." But we say, "Lord, I'm just not in a good place for prayer right now. It's a little too chaotic around me right now. But I tell you what, tomorrow morning I'm going to get up really early, when it's nice and quiet and it will be just you and me." Jesus keeps knocking, the morning comes, and it's busier than we expected. Before we know it, our lives have fallen into CHAOS. You know what CHAOS is right? *Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome*. CHAOS is when you have such a lofty picture of what you ought to be presenting to other people or to Jesus that your big and beautiful vision becomes the reason that you're never ready.

Robbie and I once had the unique experience of living in a manse or parsonage, which is always a tricky thing as a pastor. You are living in a house, and everybody tells you to make yourself at home. The church owns it, but they tell you to live in it as if it was yours, and most of the time they are lying. Someone knocks on the door, they just want to ask a question, but you see them looking over the shoulder, seeing what you've done with the place. It's an intimidating thing.

I have heard many pastors tell funny, yet horrible, stories about houses unfit to live in or walking downstairs in their underwear only to find people sitting and having a meeting at their kitchen table without asking. I heard one story that was especially intimidating because the woman who was in charge of the parsonage committee was known throughout town for keeping the neatest, most beautiful home in the city. But she gave the pastor an amazing gift. It was a bit of pastoral care advice as well as a bit of a relief from the burden about the perfect house. She said, "Preacher here's what you need to understand. If you're coming to visit me, you can drop in anytime. If you're coming to see my house, I need three days' notice. And I promise you, if I am at your house unexpectedly is because I want to see you, not your house."

Which one do you think Jesus wants from you? When Jesus says he wants to dwell with us, he'll take care of making the house ready. What he wants is to be with you. He came down to make his home in the middle of our mess, because he knows the mess is the reason we need him. In our own day and time, our homes have replaced Jerusalem as the place of a great pilgrimage. Some of you planned pilgrimages--maybe you went to your hometown, to the parent's house, to the aunts and uncles. Some of you prepared for someone to make a pilgrimage back to your house. You worried about whether everything would go just right; will it go as smoothly as the plan? Is the food going to be all out at the same time? Will it all be just as hot as it needs to be? Will I have every single decoration in the right spot to remind everyone of all those wonderful memories that we want?

And yet, you know at the core of your being that when you're in the middle of it, the house will become a home when you are no longer paying attention to the things on the walls, or the temperature of the food, or the timetable you set for your perfect celebration. You know you are ready when you are able to receive the person who is right in front of you, and they are ready to receive you and you share with one another something more than just the pleasantries - when you share the fullness of your life, the back-and-forth, the good and bad. You share your hopes and your disappointments. That's what makes the house a home.

Our lives are no different for Christ. Jesus is not waiting you to get it all figured out, to have it all picture-perfect. Christ is already ready for you. And we get ready for Christmas simply by unlocking the door. If, this morning, you don't even know what you need to be ready for Christmas, then hear the good news: you're really ready. Maybe the most faithful prayer you can pray on this first Sunday after Christmas is to start at the very beginning. "God I don't even know what to pray for. Lord, come down." When we are ready to pray like that, then we are really ready for Jesus. And when Jesus comes it will be a glorious surprise to discover what sort of place and what sort of heart he can make into a home.