

The human situation which Isaiah addressed 700 years before the birth of Christ still existed when Jesus was born, and it's the same today. The historical context and the details may differ, but the desire remains the same. It is the hope for *liberation* – whether it being freed from the shackles of an invasive conqueror; immigrants and refugee who are seeking safe homes for their families; or freedom from the internal oppression of hard memories and broken relationships, addictions and compulsions and bad habits that show we're not free; or the awful feeling of not belonging. I don't know anyone who does not feel a desire for liberation.

Isaiah called it a "land of gloom;" contemporary media imagines it as an "island of misfit toys." Isaiah described it as "walking in darkness;" we may experience it as depression. Isaiah described it a yoke that burdens; we may feel it as "the weight of the world on our shoulders;" Isaiah called it "the rod of the taskmaster;" we may experience it as the voice in our head that criticizes and never sees ourselves as good enough or lovable. Whatever the image, we find ourselves bruised and bloodied by the struggle and a sense of hopelessness.

And this is the gift that God offers – one who can save us because we realize that we cannot save ourselves. God wipes out the distance that separates us and comes to "be-with-us." He is named Jesus – which means "God saves." We are liberated from shackles and vulnerability and burdensome history and lonely self-contempt. And this is how we describe Jesus our Savior:

*Wonderful Counselor* – One who listens and understands us to us in our depression and responds with compassion, insight, and wisdom;

*Mighty God* – One who has the ability and desire to do what we cannot do on our own;

*Everlasting Father* – One who understands family and the desire for belonging and being loved;

*Prince of Peace* – One who transforms hopelessness and oppression to serenity and harmony.

The generous gift of God to us is Jesus, and today we celebrate his birth, in a story which shows us the tremendous hospitality of God. Hospitality means to make a space for guests and visitors; we provide a meal, a room, a welcome to a stranger. For Jesus himself, it seems there was no hospitality. He came to his own town, Bethlehem, the City of King David, but there was no room. So he wasn't born *in* Bethlehem, but outside the town where travellers had to park themselves because there was no convention center. He was born "on the margins" because no one offered hospitality to a pregnant mother and her beloved.

Who showed hospitality, then? The Gospel of Luke raises the question over and over again, showing us that how we *receive* the hospitality of God is crucial. [Personally, I wonder who else the angels appeared to? We don't know – did they show up at the temple too? Were they singing in the marketplace? Caroling through the streets? How many people heard the angels and ignored them? Or watched them but did nothing? Or heard the message and then made snarky comments?]

The ones who did receive the good news of the newborn Messiah were the shepherds, the smelly guys working outside town. They received the message of the angels and responded. "Let's go see;" and when they saw, they understood, and they spread the word.

When we're feeling our need for liberation, do we receive what the Lord has to offer? When we're feeling our oppression and hopelessness that things will never be what we'd like them to be, do we receive the savior God has sent us? When we feel a deep longing for healing and freedom from the weight of life and all that burdens us, do we embrace the One who can set us free? Or do we find the whole idea uncomfortable or disgusting, not trusting God, muttering and complaining about what God is *not doing*, but not receiving the hospitality that God is offering us?

Or will we learn from the example of the humble shepherds and receive the Good News that our savior has come, and he is Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. And he offers us joy, liberation, restoration, transformation. Jesus offers us *salvation* in the land of gloom; he offers to lift the burdens; to hush the critical internal voice; to heal the compulsions that make us sick and crazy; to let us know and feel that we belong to his holy family.

Come to the table of the Lord and accept the gift of God's hospitality. For it is truly God's desire to set us free. Are you willing to receive what Jesus offers?