When my kids were growing up, we had a family tradition. On Christmas Day after getting home from the Christmas Day service, we would take a picture of the kids next to the Christmas tree. I do not think our kids really enjoyed that. Since I am a pastor, they had to wait until I got home. That meant they had to stay dressed up, could not open presents, could not tear round, could not have fun, until that picture was taken. Doesn't that qualify as torture for a child? But now it is neat looking back at those pictures. Maybe you have pictures of Christmases past that you cherish.

Isaiah gives us some wonderful pictures of Christmas to hold in our hearts. These pictures focus our eyes on what Christmas is all about. You see, as important as family memories, good friends, and works of charity are, they are not what Christmas is all about. Let's take Isaiah's pictures of Christmas to heart today and cherish them.

To help us see the first picture, picture a dead stump. No matter how mighty a tree might have been, when it is cut down and reduced to a stump, it is useless. You cannot burn a stump as firewood. You cannot make a chair or a board out of it. Stumps are just a pain to get rid of.

Now listen to Isaiah's Christmas picture: A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit. Jesse was the father of King David. Although in David the family tree grew mighty, in Jesse's day that tree was just a family in the small town of Bethlehem. By Isaiah's time in the 700's BC, Jesse's family tree no longer had the same glory as in the days of David and Solomon, but a descendant of David still reigned as king in Jerusalem. There still was a tree.

Even that would change before the Savior came. Jesse's family tree would be cut down and left for dead. In 586 BC Jerusalem was destroyed, the people taken into exile, and David's dynasty ended. Only a dead stump.

But wait! What does Isaiah see? A shoot, a living branch, grows out of this dead stump! How could that be? This Branch is no other than the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. For the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord, has been poured out upon him. He is the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ, the one whom God appointed to do the divine work of saving sinners.

How could he grow out of a dead stump? He himself is the living God. In him is life. He came from the stump of Jesse to bring life to us who were dead in sin. The Apostle John describes him: In him was life and that life was the light of men.

Think of Mary and Joseph living in Nazareth. They were from David's family tree, but they had no hint of royalty. The dynasty was dead. They were but commoners. A foreigner, Herod, ruled on the throne in Jerusalem. But from Mary, even though she was a virgin and had had no sexual relations, the Savior was born and laid in a manger.

How lowly, how unexpected! Would you look in a manger where animals eat for the King of kings? Would you look at a newborn baby and see your God who created all things? How unexpected, like a shoot coming out of a dead stump!

Cherish this first picture to see that Christmas is not about cute kids in pageants or
feeling sorry for those who have no place in the inn. Rather as you look into the manger believe that child is the living God, the Christ who came to carry out the work of saving sinners, saving you and me. He is the living shoot that has grown out of the dead stump. He is the Branch that brings you life in fellowship with God.

A second Christmas picture from Isaiah takes us into the courtroom and to the judge's gavel. This is not to argue about whether we can have nativity scenes on public property. All that distracts from the real reason why we want to celebrate Christmas. Rather Isaiah brings us into God's courtroom.

At first he seems to describe the Messiah, the Christ, as an unjust judge. He writes: He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears. Don't we want a judge to carefully look at the evidence with his eyes wide open? Don't we want a judge to listen attentively to all the witnesses? Don't we want a just judge to base his decision and verdict on the evidence and testimony?

Try that in God's courtroom. Tell God: Look at me. See how hard I try to be kind. You know a lot of people are so busy at this time of the year, but I'm here in church. I know the reason for the season. I'm going to keep Christ in Christmas and not X him out. Look at how hard I try, God. And you will argue yourself right into hell.

This is the difference between faith in Jesus that saves and faith in ourselves that damns. I think we are all ready to confess that we have dark spots in our life and in our heart that we do not want entered as evidence. Even unbelievers admit that. But faith in Jesus confesses that we do not even want our best efforts or our brightest good works entered as evidence. Even the most religious and spiritual parts of our lives, even those things that seem to distinguish us from others - in God's courtroom it's all damning evidence. We do not want Jesus to judge us based on what he sees and hears, even if we thought we could show him only the good stuff in our lives.

So what great good news is in this Christmas picture from Isaiah! Jesus did not come to judge us based on what he sees and hears in our lives. But what does Isaiah say? With righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

See your spiritual poverty. We are beggars. We have nothing to offer God to win his favor. The poor people of Christmas are not Mary and Joseph turned away from the inn, but you and me. And spiritually speaking, Mary and Joseph as well were spiritually poor, but that is not what people talk about. You see, you and me, Mary and Joseph, we are all bankrupted by sin.

But listen to the good news from your judge. With righteousness he will judge the needy. That is you and me. With justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. Again, that is you and me.

Instead of judging us based on the evidence of our hearts and lives, he judges us based on his righteous life. That is why we must come before him as beggars with nothing in our hands. For if we cling to some goodness based on our life, then we are not holding on to his righteousness. Remember the hymn writers words: Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

So this Christmas come to the manger with empty hands ready to receive the verdict from your judge. Listen to the words from his mouth that declare you not guilty because he counts his righteousness as yours. Then worship him at peace with God.

That brings us to the third picture of Christmas that Isaiah paints: peace. The angels
sang about this peace: **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to me on whom his favor rests.**

But this peace is so often misunderstand, just as Isaiah's picture here is misused, because this peace only comes through the words spoken by Jesus, our Judge, through his verdict that sets us free. It is the peace of forgiveness, peace with God.

Isaiah pictures this peace by using enemies from the world of nature and picturing them living at peace: The wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear, the baby and the cobra.

We, too, were natural born enemies fighting against God. Sin's warfare against the Almighty, warfare that ends in defeat hell. But Jesus, the Baby of Bethlehem, brings peace to you through his verdict of forgiveness.

Isaiah writes: **The cow will fed with the bear, their young will lie down together.** Although we often romanticize bears as cute and cuddly, they can be ferocious. Not many deaths are more gruesome than being mauled by a bear. Would you want to be between a mother and her cubs? But notice the perfect peace that even her cubs lie down with the calves at peace.

To help us picture that peace, think of a teddy bear. A teddy bear takes the wild, ferocious bear and changes it into a thing of comfort to bring peace to a child's heart.

Because of the Baby in the manger, we have been turned from God's enemies into his children. This Baby came to end our warfare by taking away our sins. Through faith in Jesus, we call God our dear Father and look to him for comfort and peace. Cherish this picture of Christmas peace.

What beautiful pictures Isaiah paints of Christmas to hold in our hearts. These pictures focus our eyes on what Christmas is all about. You see, as important as family memories, good friends, and works of charity are, they are not what Christmas is all about. May we always take Isaiah's pictures of Christmas to heart today and cherish them. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill