

Songs of a Generation

Isaiah 12

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John Song

Thank you, worship team, for that. Well, good morning Columbia Presbyterian Church. My name is Johnathan Song. I am the pastor of youth ministries here. And at this time, we'd like to dismiss our children age 4 to first grade downstairs to gather together for children's worship. For everyone else, we won't ask you what your age is, but we're just glad that you are here to worship with us today. So, go ahead and please open, or swipe, your Bibles to Isaiah 12.

We are continuing our series on songs of Christmas. And as we as a church are in a time of advent and we are celebrating advent season. For those of you who are new to church or are even new to the tradition of advent, advent simply means "coming" or "arriving in Latin. It is the period before Christmas celebrating and preparing to dwell upon the true meaning of Christmas, remember that we, too, just like the people of old, are anticipating the arrival of the King. And like any meaningful arrival or proclamation, there's always songs to sing. And so, this series is designed for us to explore these songs of Christmas while we await the return of our great King.

So, with that, let's look at Isaiah 12 together. And we will read the entire passage in full. Isaiah 12:

You will say in that day: "I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation."

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Will you pray with me?

Our Father, we pray for a song in our heart to sing of your salvation, for us to find our ultimate comfort, peace, joy, in your Son, Jesus Christ. For us to be filled with excitement and thanksgiving to proclaim the name of the One who has come in frail humanity, who suffered and died and conquered the grave to bring us new life and make us a new creation. Help us to make this the song that we sing. Spirit, come now as we proclaim your word that speaks of these truths here today. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Today, I'm delighted to speak to you about something that is near and dear to my life and my experiences growing up, and that is the role of songs to shape our worship and shape our desires. This is more than just a passion for me. I studied at the University of Maryland with a degree in music/education because I believe the capacity of music to teach and to share the love of God. Music is fundamentally a spiritual experience, one that connects us to this God of creativity who gives the gift of music to us.

So, I was a teacher for the Howard County Public School System for three years. Mr. Song teaching music, you know, it might just be too much of hitting a nail on the head. But nevertheless, I didn't mind it because I just loved the power of music. I think it's undeniable. Every generation has songs that define who they are and what they're all about, don't they? Think back to 50 years ago, the song of the year 1968, any guesses? "Hey Jude," by the Beatles. It defined a generation, the explosion of rock 'n' roll, our love for British pop groups, peculiar and interesting hair choices. Flash forward 50 or so years in 2011, One Direction, "That's What Makes You Beautiful" defined a generation, our love for musical reality

competition winners, our love for British pop groups, peculiar and interesting hair choices, same thing. There's just something about the power of music that brings something deep and meaningful to us.

But when you think about it, it's more than just a collection of tonal notes arranged in a specific manner. It's more than rules of voice leading or instrumentation or music theory. It's how music makes us feel and connects to us as individuals. There's a reason why so many genres of music – like goth, punk, classical, post-modern – they're named after philosophies, worldviews. It's because they shape the attitudes and the worship of its listeners. That's why great songs, the best songs, they never truly leave us, do they? They help us make sense of our world and help us to understand ourselves in ways that never get old, no matter how many times we sing, "I want it that way." There's just something about it that just connects to us.

This is no less true of our song today in Isaiah 12. Isaiah 12 marks the conclusion of a major section of prophecy for the people of God. In chapters 1-11 of Isaiah, we read about Israel's rebellion and their turning away from God in their deeds so much to the point that God's judgment is placed upon the wicked in Israel and the unrepentant, that Israel's wickedness is so bad that God has to send the enemies of God to give them over to Israel. But the beauty of those 11 chapters is that God doesn't leave them there. Instead, He gives them this promise that He will bring a redeemer to His people. He gives them a new song to sing to define their generation. They are no longer the generation that is trapped in their wickedness and given over to their sin. They will be redeemed by the Emmanuel, God with Us.

And there are those who would argue that Isaiah 12 shouldn't belong at the end and the conclusion of chapters 1-11 and going on to these other chapters. You see, scholars and commentators have tried to say that Isaiah 12 doesn't belong in this text. It seems like a surreal musical interlude out of nowhere. But to state this would be to ignore the grand narrative of Scripture and the Old Testament people of God. Just even last week, we had Randy preach to us about how music and the songs and the singing of the people of God is always following a victory or a proclamation of salvation. And we still do this today. This is normal. Rather than just being a random song plopped in the middle of Isaiah, this is normal for the people of God, and this is normal for us even if we don't believe in God, as some of you might be here today. We welcome you here to this church.

Think about our relationship with sports. There's always songs to sing. I went to the University of Maryland at College Park, and after every victory, we'd sing the Maryland fight song, a song that was 90 years old. It was written in 1928. And we would sing, "Maryland, we're all behind you. Wave high the black and gold." It was a rallying cry. People would yell and scream. A bunch of collegiate students would try and spell the word Maryland. It was great, it was awesome. You got to understand, our mascot was a Terrapin, so whatever we lacked in intimidation of our mascot, we made up in volume.

We define ourselves in songs all the time. So, rather than just being a random song in the middle of prophecy, this is something that helps us define the people of God, the coming salvation, and the hope it would bring. It helps us to know what songs to sing. And so, in your outline, you have these different songs that this song tells us how to sing. The first is songs of anger and atonement. Now, we sing songs of anger and atonement all the time. "We are never, ever, ever getting back together," Taylor Swift, 2012. Songs of atonement, "I Want You Back," Jackson 5, 1970. We have categories for songs of anger and atonement all the time in our relationships and, ultimately, how we're all longing to be restored.

When we think about God's anger and atonement, sometimes we are singing a song that is in the wrong tune. We are prone to confuse some categories regarding God's anger and God's atonement that verse 1 helps clarify for us. Now, it usually follows in two extremes how the song falters, how we're prone to sing the song of anger and song of atonement incorrectly. First extreme: Lord, come one, you can't be angry at me. Surely, you're a God of love. You can't be a God of wrath. Wrath and love can't exist together. So, no matter what I do, you're just always going to smile down upon me.

In this line of thinking, there is this idea that they wish to preserve the love of God. That's a very rightful thing for us to do. We want to preserve the fullness and the love of God. But they do it by denying

that anything that appears at first glance uncharitable or unloving should not be a part of God and His character and who He is. But when you do this, you have to ask yourself the question, if that's the case, then what did Christ die for in the first place? Did Christ go to the cross to take our sins upon Himself, taking the penalty and the wrath of God that we deserve, taking our shame, our rebellion, our idolatries, our false loves, paying the price for all that is due? Because if that didn't happen, if you want to remove God's anger on that situation, then true justice is never paid for. And then we have to ask ourselves the question, how can we say that God is a loving God if He never makes that which was wrong whole again?

This is why I think saying things like, "God can never be angry," or, "God is never angry with the sinner, just the sin," is actually a damage to the gospel itself. You see, God needs to redeem us, not just the concept of sin in us. God needs to redeem us. He needs to save us from ourselves. The wrath of God needs to be placed onto sin and sinner alike for God to truly be a just God. There is often too much of a tendency to separate sin and sinner as though they are not the same, that sin is just a disease in the life of a genuinely good person. But to love is to be angry at the very things that would destroy that love, and that might include being angry at a person themselves.

Some of you, it may be hard for you to think about this. So, how can love and anger coexist against God's children? Maybe an imperfect analogy can suffice to help us to understand this. My precious youth students here, CPC youth students in this room, do you believe – rhetorical question, you don't need to answer out loud, although, you could if you want – do you believe that your parents love you? Yes, good. Now, my beloved youth students, do you believe that you parents get angry at you? Yes. So, in other words, anger is not necessarily an opposition to love, which is why for those of us who may be uneasy with that idea and try to eliminate God's anger, the very thing that we wind up doing is removing the beauty and the work of the cross and Christ's payment for us of our sins.

Here's what one commentator says:

"The Bible never teaches that the wrath of God is removed and that it is simply turned into love. If that were the case, it would present a low view of the integrity of God. God is wrathful against sin and sinners, and that wrath must be visited."

This is why we sing in our hymns, "On that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied." The Gettys in 2002 wrote that. You see, to take away God's anger is to say that Jesus didn't really need to die for me. But that's the first extreme. What about the second? If the first extreme caused us to fail to sing the song of anger correctly, what about the other way we fail to sing the song of atonement? Maybe the idea of God's anger is not controversial to you. Maybe you're okay with that, you like that. You're like, "Yes, anger, great. I'm justified, wonderful." But maybe the second half of verse 1 is what you struggle with, that the comfort of the Lord is never upon you because you're always in fear that God's anger has never turned away from you.

To you, maybe you're only reading the first half of verse 1 and not the second. And that upon hearing that Jesus is enough, the cross has paid the penalty, that you are forgiven – you are clean, you stand before the King and the throne and you can boldly approach it with confidence knowing that you are justified by the Savior's blood – you backpedal in your own sense of self-worth, and think that there's still something left for you to do to have God to stop being angry with you. You think that there's some unfinished item on the salvation check list, and until you've been a good enough person, the anger of God still persists on you. God is this awful parent that never lets any bad deed remain unknown, who just shoves it in your face every time you did it wrong. And you walk around eggshells in your spiritual walk because you feel like you've messed up again and you got to make it up to the Lord.

And if this is you, I want you to know you're singing the song of atonement wrongly. Isaiah 12 has some great news for you. It says the Lord would come to comfort us, that His wrath has turned away not because you have done exactly what was needed to be able to follow Him and now, He's coming back to

you so you could serve a command God like some sort of pious, superstitious voodoo doll. But rather, he's coming back to you and turning away His wrath just because of His "Amazing Grace, John Newton, 1779.

One commentator writes this, "Reconciliation is not our willingness to have God, but God's willingness to have us." God's wrath leads to God's comfort. "From the human, end the plea, let your anger turn away" is the only and sufficient course of action.

So, brothers and sisters today who give in to the sting of guilt every time of sin, what song of atonement are you singing here today in church? When you come here, you are reminding yourself that it's not your grace that makes God's love sufficient and His wrath to be appeased. It's not that you're such an awesome servant and amazing person worth love. It's not because you've got all your ducks in a row that makes God shine His face upon you. But it's the reality that you are His, and He has called you into His own. He has embraced you and said, you are enough because Christ has made you enough. Can you sing that today? Is that your song?

The gospel reminds us, both the wrath that was turned away and the severity of sin and the grace we have in Christ does not lead us into those extremes, either leading us to a license to sin or a lifetime of shame. It's both the saving atonement of Christ and the appeasement of His anger that frees us from both extremes.

I know I've spent a lot of time on verse 1, but it's from this jumping point that leads us into these other songs. It's only from this starting point that the rest of this song unfolds and makes sense to us as a response. Verse 2 talks about God being the salvation. "Behold, God is my salvation." And from that salvation comes two implications, songs of trust and songs of thanksgiving. "I will trust and not be afraid." I want you to think of it this way. When you fully place your trust and hope in that which will save you, you will do things that are unimaginably risky and dangerous, but at the same time, feel completely and utterly safe. This is what we do every time we enter into an air plane. We entrust our lives to this metal aircraft filled with combustible fuel travelling around 600 miles an hour. But our hope is secure because, physics.

Our culture embraces this idea. They love the idea of placing their trust and hope in things that maybe we shouldn't be placing our trust and hope in. Thrill seekers on YouTube who jump off the world's tallest buildings, dangling with just a chord or a parachute or that little squirrel thing. I don't know, right? They're entrusting their entire lives to a piece of fabric. Why? Their hope is secure in not the ability to survive the fall, but in the thing that they're placing their hope in at the right moment, the right time, the right situation, they'll be rescued. Maybe we ask those individuals, why in the world would you do that? Maybe they might respond, because the experience, and thrill, and joy, and wonder far outweighs their fear. They trust in what they've been told, and trust in the words and experiences of those who have gone before them.

This is how we can sing songs of trust in Christ. As we grow in our faith, we gain more trust in taking the step into the unknown and trust that the Lord will sustain us as He has the people of old, as the words of others who have gone before us. This is what Calvin writes in his commentary on this chapter:

"Confidence precedes from faith as an effect from its cause. By faith, we perceive salvation as laid up for us in God, and a calm and peaceful state of mind arises from it. But when faith is wanting, there can be no peace of conscience."

Verse 2 is echoing these exact same sentiments. If you look at verse 2, it might seem familiar. It's the song in Exodus 15 that we heard last week, "The Lord is my strength and my song." But Isaiah, like any good song writer, remixes the song, "I will trust and not be afraid." So, in the remix, we see that in addition to the Lord being our strength, trust and fearlessness is our response, foundation, hope.

This isn't how we always feel when we're told that God is our salvation, is it? Sometimes, we ask ourselves, why don't I feel more comforted by the message of the gospel than I do, than in my current

experience? If I have faith that God is the One who remains my salvation, why is it that I worry, feel depressed, sad, lonely, anxious, troubled, afraid of others, afraid of the world, afraid of my past, afraid of the future? How can I sing a song of trust and thanksgiving? Why is this so hard for me as a Christian to do?

One of my mentors who led worship and was just someone who disciplined me growing up reminded me that the words we sing on a Sunday morning aren't simply words on a screen ascribed to a melody or just nice tunes. But, rather, words when we actually think about what we're singing, the content of those words should remind us of our insufficiency to sing those words, but also, of the reality of who we are in Jesus Christ to be able to sing those words in our state of wandering. When we sing words in Psalm 63, "You are my God, so I will bless you as long as I live. In your name, I will lift up my hands," we're not singing it with complete honesty in our current state, in the state that we're just walking around with our hands lifted high all the time. But we're singing it in complete honesty of who we are in the new creation of Christ, our soul's desire, our soul's longing, how God has sustained our worship.

After all, there are weeks where our Monday through Saturday worship does not align with our Sundays. So, we can sing these songs with boldness and with truth because they are true not of us, the individual, but us as who is our head, Jesus Christ. We can sing these words no matter where you are, no matter what place you're in, if you're lonely, if you're sad, if you're depressed. Because Christ faced these exact same afflictions here on earth. He was anxious to the point of shedding blood. He was abandoned and lonely by his very own disciples in His hour of greatest need. And yet, these are the things that describe Christ's perfect humanity.

So, that means that we can sing, "I will trust and I will not be afraid," because we know it's not about where we are in our moments of fear of lack of faith, but it's rather resting in the One who has gone before us and secured our salvation. This is why the Scriptures continually remind us, like Hebrews 10:23, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." Because Christ is this never-ending fountain. Verse 3, "With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation," because Christ is this never-ending fountain from whom all blessings flow. That is our Doxology, which was written in 1674.

It's only natural that the prophet says that salvation is this well, a source of life, one that will never dry or spoil. That from these fountains come songs of thanksgiving, of gratitude. Give thanks to the Lord, call upon His name. We can do this because our Savior's grace is never ending.

This is what gives us, then, the hearts for songs of exaltation and evangelism. You see, once our atonement is secure, once our trust and thanksgiving are set, then this leads us to exalting His name, lifting Him up, to tell others about Him, evangelism. See, our joy doesn't become complete until others hear about it, until Christ is lifted up. This is the act of worship. And whether you like it or not, or whether you are a Christian in this room or not, you will find ways for exaltation and evangelism in something. Pop icons, TV shows, they do this and ask for it all the time, demand it from their fan base.

Have you ever met a friend who's just really passionate about something on Netflix? And he just has to tell you about it? And it's just like, yes, I get it, it's a great show. They just do it all the time, and they almost tie your arm down to watch this thing because they're so passionate about what it is. This is why fan bases have names. *The Walking Dead* fans are called Deadheads. *Thronies* for *Game of Thrones* fans. Ariana Grande fans are called – I did not know this – Arianators, which is I think taking the limits of English language too far. My point is, you will find in your life, whether you choose to follow Christ or not, you will find a song of exaltation and evangelism to sing. You will dedicate a place, space, time, money, devotion to this thing because this is the longings of the human soul.

The question is whether or not those things are ultimately worthy of your time, place, space, money, devotion. The question is, do those things satisfy the deepest longings of your heart? Or do they leave you wanting just a little bit more? So, give thanks to the Lord. Call upon His name. Make known His

deeds among the peoples. Proclaim that His name is exalted. What are you proclaiming? Who are you evangelizing? Whose deeds are you making known among the peoples? Where do your passions and desires go, maybe in the middle of the night when no one else is watching, where are they drawn to?

In the New International Commentary of the Old Testament, the commentator Oswald puts it this way:

“Praise is essential to a robust spiritual life, not because God needs them like some neurotic tyrant, but because we need to give them. It is only in this way that we can refocus our attention upon how much we have received from a loving Father, and in that appreciation, stop attempting to use Him as our servant.”

You see, when Christ is the good news of the song that you sing, you begin to place Christ in His proper place of worship and begin to place yourself in the position of humility and seeing yourself for who you truly are. You begin to see that our source of shouting and singing as the song commands us to do is to only be found in the worship of our King. The only person worthy of all of this is our great salvation who has come.

Just to put it simply, as John Piper famously quoted, “Missions exist because worship doesn’t.” Evangelism and exaltation are the song of the people of God. And praise naturally is an outflowing of this. And that’s what leads us to our last two songs, and these are the songs of belonging and being. So, just a quick question. Have you ever felt like you don’t belong in a community, or maybe that the identity you’ve put on yourself is a false one?

A little bit of an embarrassing story. I remember the first time I tried break-dancing. This was back in middle school, not now. But anyone who has seen my middle school photo back in the day, you will know that just on the optics of what I looked like back when I was 12 years old, you would look at that kid with the ginormous eyeglasses that could capture satellite images, it was so big. The perfectly rounded bowl-cut, the kid who wore Pinocchio suspenders to school. This was not a b-boy, just on optics alone. This is not a hip-hop master. But to me, I wanted to belong to the cool community. And I thought learning how to break-dance would help me because windmills and flairs are cool. And anyone who can do a windmill or a flair is cool, so, transitive property of equality, I would be cool if I learned how to do a windmill or a flair.

I tried to learn how to do a basic six-step, and I was finally in a place where I was gaining a little bit of confidence. I had learned a little bit. And I went to a group of popular kids who knew how to break-dance, and they were in a dance circle. Do you ever have that moment in your life where you see others doing some things that you’ve practiced so hard for, and when you watch them do it, you realize, “I will never ever be able to do this.” That was that moment for me. I did not belong in that group, and it became clear, as I was watching them do this, how woefully unprepared I was for my turn. So, knowing that I was about to make a huge fool of myself, I did the middle school thing. I made an excuse about how much my stomach hurt, and I walked away.

But, you see, this is our longing. We long to belong. We long to be. This is exactly how the nation of Israel, prior to their salvation, is in relation to their standing to a holy God. They are the awkward kid in a break-dancing circle realizing, “I can’t do this.” But here’s the amazing reality of all this. The Lord makes them belong, and the Lord makes them be. In verse 6, he says, “O inhabitant of Zion.” Now, Zion is the holy city. And the way that the word “Zion” is presented, it’s presented in the original language of the text as a feminine noun. It’s actually proclaimed as an “exaltant woman.” And the imagery here that is presented is one of a bridegroom and a bride. So, the people of God as in oneness with the bride groom, the one that’s in salvation.

What that is meaning is that they are now one. The bridegroom has fully sanctified, purified, made holy his bride. And so, by doing this, the prophet Isaiah is proclaiming to the people of Israel and to you

that whatever has kept you out of the community, out of your sense of belonging, out of the sense of feeling like you don't know yourself, and he's saying this song is to remind yourself of who the bridegroom is, of how great your Savior is, of how He calls you to Himself, how He makes you belong and be.

He reminds you that you are bound to Him. He reminds you that you are part of a body, His church. He reminds you that He will come and take all the bad songs in your life and will one day make them whole again. He reminds you, and He rejoices over you with singing. This is how we can sing words like, "Bless the Lord, O my soul. Worship His holy name. Sing like never before, O my soul. Worship His holy name." And we will get the chance to do that. And when we do that, all the songs that we've grown up with will fade away. And the song of God's people will be, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is, and is to come, forever and ever and ever and ever. Amen."