

Sermon Transcript
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Simeon, Anna, and Isaiah all have one thing in common: faced with God's saving love, they all express almost ecstatic joy. Simeon cries, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." Anna exudes thanks to God for the child and spreads the word widely. Isaiah especially is overwhelmed by the joy and peace given to him by God. Isaiah's joy stems not only from the fact that God is endowing His Chosen People with saving love (what we celebrate on Christmas), but also from the fact that we can uniquely reflect that same love as humans. According to our First Reading, God has given us virtue. Isaiah says as much as he proclaims with great happiness that God has arrayed him in a "robe of righteousness." We do not often think of God's love in this way, but it is nonetheless important to do so, because it means not only that we have been given more gifts than we are aware from God, it also means that we have a unique responsibility to fulfill.

When we think of the separation between mankind and animals, the first thing that comes to mind in many cases is our unique intelligence. It is true that we are, as far as we can determine, the smartest of the animal kingdom. Just as

the bear was blessed with claws and the spider blessed with webs, we were blessed with our ability to think and to understand. This is what God means when He says we are created in His image: while we are not perfect simulacra, we have evolved in a way that allows us to comprehend things previously only God could comprehend, and foremost of these is the idea of morality. Just as Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, so too did our apeish ancestors grow understanding and become enlightened to the truth of Good and Evil. We, as humans, are uniquely responsible for our actions as a result. Mark Twain once remarked that man was given the “ability to distinguish good from evil, and with it, necessarily, the ability to do evil; for there can be no evil act without the presence of consciousness of it in the doer.” In our species’ quest for intelligence, we have developed a unique sensitivity to action. While an animal has no concept of right and wrong, and so can act as it chooses without any sense of guilt or any sense that it has erred at all, we are all keenly aware of what is right and what is wrong. Twain seemed to think this was a curse, but it is perhaps a blessing beyond almost any other we possess. Indeed, stating that “he will not keep silent” and will proclaim God’s Love to the earth, Isaiah sees that the decisions we make can be glorious opportunities to praise saving love that has come to join us on earth. In truth, he seems to argue that all of nature was made to work in harmony with God. While plants and animals, by existing, do so automatically, because they have no

other option than to do so (the clear takeaway of the psalm that reads , “praise the Lord, sun and moon and highest heavens and sea monsters and all deeps and fire and hail and snow and frost.”), we have been granted the unique ability to praise God with our choices. This is not only something Isaiah notes when he says “For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” God has planted the seeds of praise in every living and every nonliving thing; it is embedded in the makeup of the universe itself. And just as a bear fishing in a river with its claws and a spider spinning its web are, in a way, all praising God, who created this harmony between all creatures, so we too are called to manifest praise in what instincts we choose to follow. We were created along with the rest of the universe designed to praise God. It is implanted in all of us, and so, while sometimes those instincts can be diluted or distorted by the fog of our will and our Earthly needs, they are still showing us the path. We should not refrain from a gift to the needy, even if we know they may misuse it. Many of us stay focused on what we fear will happen if we act. That gift to a panhandler may go to fuel their drug habit, we say, and so we refrain. However, it is better for them, better for us, and better for our praise and worship of God to give that gift even if some would call us foolish and naive for doing so.

This can be intimidating; we are so often focused on worldly ideas of morality that we fear that we will be judged if our deeds have unintended consequences. “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions,” we say. It is simply not so. As it is said in Psalm 37, “The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with His hand.” And it is further said in Romans, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” The Lord does not love us less for our mistakes, and the Lord does not punish us for our unfortunate errors on the path to kindness. We are loved just the same no matter what we do, and that includes failed kindness. It includes a generosity misused, a kind word misplaced, and a helping hand misallocated. In short, it is not only okay for us to fail to live up to greatness, but expected, and this is a great liberation.

When we understand that our worthiness and our gifts from God are not reliant on our actions, our other texts start to make more sense. Simeon and Anna saw that our badness is not to be condemned and burned out. Jesus, but a baby in the temple, was an indicator and a reminder that we are not given this knowledge of Good and Evil to be toyed with and tried by God. It may have seemed that way to the Israelites who would have known that they could choose but been terrified to

choose incorrectly and face eternal damnation. But the miracle we celebrate at Christmastime is that we have free choice and, importantly, that we are forgiven when we fail. If we fall out of harmony with nature God will not banish us from His love but take us even closer to Him and allow us to try again, because nothing can separate us, not even our own sin. The beauty of Jesus' sacrifice is that it is a reminder that our free choice is not punished but celebrated. We have been blessed eternally not only with the gift of life, not only the gift of Love, not only the gift of free will, but the gift of infinite forgiveness. All of this means that we can choose love rather than loving automatically. We have the ability to act kindly with intention rather than compulsion. We have the ability to think about what we do and then do something to help each other. We shouldn't refrain from kindness for fear of getting it wrong. It's okay to take risks in our quest for holiness.