

## **“BEHOLD! I DO A NEW THING!”**

There is a novel called *The Good Soldier* that begins with the following sentence: *“This is the saddest story I ever heard.”* Well, today I’m going to tell you a sadder story—a story about a husband who loved his wife dearly and a wife who scorned her husband’s love. The husband had taken his wife to be his bride at a tender age and showered her with gifts. He gave her the best food to eat, a beautiful dwelling to live in, protection from anyone who would do her harm, and children for her to love. He showered her with gifts, loved her with an everlasting love and was faithful to her. Whenever she treated him badly, he forgave her.

Initially his wife was delighted with the arrangement. But then she began to change. She began to be drawn to other men who sought her affections. She made them her lovers and even passed along to them the gifts her husband had given to her when they were wed. She became addicted to adultery and squandered herself shamelessly on other partners.

Her husband wept over her. He forgave her again and again and pleaded with her to leave her lovers and return home and be faithful to him. But she had become indifferent to his love and turned a deaf ear to her pleas. He warned her that her adulteries were leading her down the road to destruction but she didn’t believe him. She neither cared for him nor feared him: in her mind it was as if he had never existed at all.

This story is an allegory of God’s relationship with Israel as recorded by the prophet Hosea. God sent Hosea to personally act out this drama as a sign to the Israelites. He commanded Hosea to marry an adulterous wife and have two sons and a daughter by her. And after his wife had abandoned him and become a prostitute, God commanded Hosea to go after her and bring her back home and love her as a husband. This was all intended to provide Israel with an example of God’s faithfulness to her in spite of her faithlessness to Him. But in spite of God’s words and Hosea’s prophetic example, Israel continued play the adulterous wife, chasing after “other husbands”—the pagan gods of the Canaanites, with their shrine prostitution, orgiastic festivals and child sacrifices. She gave herself over completely to pagan worship, offering up God’s gifts of oil, wine and grain to pagan gods instead of to God. Still, God was patient, taking her back again and again. He had found her as a child, taught her to walk and then made her his bride. He would be faithful to Israel even if Israel was unfaithful to Him. Eventually Israel became so depraved and her heart so hardened against God that even when He warned her of the catastrophe that awaited her if she continued in her pagan ways, she persisted in sin, barely acknowledging his existence and abusing the prophets he sent to warn her. Finally, after he had tried everything else, God’s heart was so stirred up against Israel his bride

that it overflowed with...what? Wrath? Judgment? No. God's heart overflowed with...Christmas.

In these verses from Hosea, we are allowed to look into the very heart of God. Provoked beyond measure by Israel's continued transgressing of the Law and corruption of worship—God responded with...love. If ever his wrath was justified, it was now. If ever a people had earned his terrible vengeance, it was now. Things had gone so far that His anger had boiled up like that of a jealous husband over a cheating wife. It breaks out in his words: *"Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans."* (Hosea 11:6) But then...then His heart of love trumps his anger. He says: *"My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger....For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath."* (Hosea 11:8-9) In these words—God's own words—we see as nowhere else that, as the Apostle John wrote, *"God is love."* (1 John 4:8) God's heart of hearts consists of pure and unconditional love for his children—a love which overcomes his well-deserved wrath. Instead of unleashing a flood of destruction and death for our sins he sends a tide of mercy and forgiveness to cover all the sins of mankind.

And this is where Advent begins—in God's heart of hearts, a heart of pure love. In the words, *"I will not come in wrath,"* (Hosea 11:9) we see the fountainhead of God's plan for man's salvation. Instead of punishing man for his sins, God would forgive man his sins. He foretold it through the prophet Isaiah: *"Look! I am doing a new thing! Do you not see it? I make a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland! (Isaiah 43:19)* When we were hopelessly lost in the wilderness of our sin, God showed us a way out. When we were parched and scorched by the fierce heat of our rebellion and disobedience, God gave us water to drink, making, *"Water...gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert; [ turning] the burning sand [into] a pool and the thirsty ground [into] bubbling springs."* (Isaiah 35:6-7) )

And what was this new thing God was going to do? He announces it through the prophet Jeremiah: *"I will raise up a King...and...this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord [is] Our Righteousness."* (Jeremiah 23:5-6) How unexpected! How undeserved! How miraculous is God's solution to the problem of our sin! Since we had no righteousness of our own, being steeped in sin as we were, God announced that he would raise up a new King who would serve to BE our righteousness! Just as Hosea's love for his wife Gomer was all that could rescue her from her sinful nature and depraved life, God's love for us was all that could rescue us from our sinful nature and depraved life. God had to do it all.

And so six centuries later, according to God's plan, the infant King was born. And just as the youthful David had defeated the enemies of Israel with a small stone and a slingshot, all the legions of Satan were defeated and bound in chains by child in a cradle. So comes the King, the Messiah, the bearer of sins and the bringer of righteousness. He is Jesus, our Savior, and Immanuel: God with us.

Advent is a season when God urges us to abandon all thoughts of justifying ourselves before Him and replacing them with faith in His Son. As Luther once said, *“Cling to this Infant for he alone can bear you safely into the arms of God.”* The salvation Jesus brings is not something we can earn, it can come only as a gift. He had to act for us because we are imprisoned in our sins and cannot act for ourselves. ***In every human being, the point at which he most needs to reform himself is precisely the point at which he is powerless.*** The alcoholic or drug addict knows in his occasional moments of sobriety that his addiction is going to destroy him and those around him, but it doesn't matter: he is enslaved to that addiction by a power greater than himself. The greedy man knows that his craving for wealth has only led to more and more craving, but he still craves more because he still doesn't have enough. The man of anger knows—even as he feels the heat of rage building up within him that his temper may cost him the love of those he loves the most, yet he plunges ahead in his rage, reveling in the damage he's causing. The compulsive gambler who has squandered his last dime at the racetrack or the casino desperately tries to borrow more for one last chance to hit the jackpot. And even though at the edge of their minds there is a nagging voice telling them that what they are doing is insanity—they are powerless to stop. In St. Paul's words, *“The evil that I do not want to do--this I keep on doing.”* (Romans 7:21)

And we are no better. Each one of us harbors a secret sin or sins that have the upper hand in our life. We are no less addicted than they are—just better at hiding it. And it is into this impossible situation—this prison house we find ourselves in where we stare into the abyss that lies between God's expectations of us and our inability to meet those expectations—it is into this torture chamber that the Bible speaks words which part the darkness and give us light and freedom: *“In repentance and trust is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength.”* (Isaiah 30:15)

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength”* and *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* According to Jesus, all the law is summed up in these two commands and we can't obey either one of them. But thanks be to God, we don't have to, because Jesus Christ has fulfilled them for us by living a perfect life and dying a perfect death in our place. When we believe this we can begin to love God and one another with a love that comes not from ourselves—for we are very poor lovers—but with a love that comes from Him—a purer and better love than we have ever known.

Down through the ages men have loved many things. Alexander the Great loved conquest and it is said that when he had conquered all the world he sat down and wept because there was no more world left to conquer. Socrates loved wisdom and ended up committing suicide because it was the wisest thing to do. Edgar Allen Poe wrote a poem about a man who had made such an idol out of his beloved Anabelle Lee that after she died he continued to worship her in her coffin. The poem ends, *“And so all the night tide I lie down by the side of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride, in her sepulcher there by the sea; in her tomb by the side of the sea.”* All those who love idols—be they idols of money or drugs or conquest or even human wisdom—are in love with death. There is only One

Who can give us life: the One Man, Jesus Christ, who alone is our light, our hope and our salvation. Amen.

**Hosea 11:1-9** “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them. “Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them. “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man — the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities.

**Isaiah 43:16-21** This is what the LORD says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

**Matthew 3:1-12** In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ” John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”