

2013

Christmas 1 • Isaiah 63:7–14 • December 29, 2013

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Recommended Citation

Biermann, Joel (2013) "Christmas 1 • Isaiah 63:7–14 • December 29, 2013," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 39: No. 4, Article 13.
Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol39/iss4/13>

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Israel, God's rebellious son, God's adulterous bride, remains always the unexpected recipient of God's greatest giving. He even intervenes for Israel as a Savior who chooses to suffer affliction for the sake of his chosen people. In response to such extraordinary lovingkindness, Israel, of course, rebels ... and then yet once more remembers her saving Lord. So the familiar story goes. Still, in light of Christmas revelry, it's a story we'd rather not confront just now and the text, aside from the fleeting mention of Lord turned Savior, reeks of poor timing. God's timing, of course, is perfect; Paul makes that clear in the text from Galatians. But it is the accompanying Gospel reading that forces us to consider the possibility that perhaps the Old Testament story is better timed than we would care to admit.

With the official celebration of Christmas over, and the debauch of New Year's Eve soon to pass, people are beginning on December 29 to give some thought to getting "back to normal." Christmas was nice, but the ordinary routine will bring the comfortable and reassuring familiarity of an old friend. It'll be good to get into the regular swing of things. But, we forget: Christmas delivered a baby. And as the saying goes: a baby changes everything. Once a baby arrives there's no going back. The old routine is gone forever. The Christmas baby was duly and fittingly welcomed with great festi-

ity and much celebration. And once the trappings of the celebration have been packed away, it's tempting to assume that the baby has gone with them. But, a baby won't be packed into a box and forgotten. Indeed, the newly arrived Christmas baby makes an even greater impact than any ordinary birth. This child has come to save ... and on his terms. This baby comes with an agenda attached. This child brings a kingdom, and a kingdom has a king; indeed a kingdom can have but one king. And that's the rub, and that's the vindication of the sad, old, unwelcome story of Isaiah. God acts and brings salvation. Man responds with rebellion. What choice does he have? A new king has arrived and the current potentate cannot help but keenly feel the threat.

Autonomous man is always threatened by one who would usurp his place of rule. Of course, autonomous man is a myth. But deluded by the illusion of self-mastery and bolstered by the culture's eager affirmation of the supremacy of the individual, autonomous man is as resistant to the incursion of a new ruler as was Herod of Jerusalem. Faced with such a threat, Herod provides the paradigmatic response: violent attack. Herod may be the terrifying ogre of the Christmas story, but modern man still plays his game. Worse, we still play his game. The baby comes with an agenda. He is Lord. He will not be content until he rules all ... even every aspect of our own lives. Herod's reaction isn't so surprising, then. This baby changes everything. Because this baby has come, someone is going to get hurt. Someone is going to die. It is inevitable. The baby threatens to kill my autonomy. He will kill me: my need for a savior is the admission of my own utter inability and failure to rule my world and myself. *Someone* is going to get hurt, and if not me ... then the baby! And so it happens. On Calvary Herod's business is finished. The baby is killed. But, God is not about to lose the fight for his people—even when the fight is with the people themselves! When autonomous man attacks, God fights back. The Lord is raised; his rule is vindicated. His claim on our lives is validated and made ineradicable. We are beat by the baby. In the baptismal waters, the self dies. We remember the truth of that event, and live it again. Autonomy is destroyed. Just like Israel of old, the new self is raised from death to live a new life subject to the Lord.

Suggested Outline

What about the Baby?

- I. The Baby has come.
 - A. Christmas is over; we're ready to move on.
 - B. But, nothing can be the same anymore.
- II. The Baby has an agenda.
 - A. He is Savior and Lord.
 - B. Autonomous people attack this threat.
- III. The Baby will rule.
 - A. All will eventually yield.
 - B. Stop fighting his rule: die and live.

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