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Do You Hear the Beat? – Isaiah 2: 2-5

Note on the message: How many of you were math teachers? And how many times were you asked, “When am I ever going to use this?” For the rest of you: how many of you asked that?

Yet, few if any of us now would question that math underlies everything, even if we don’t understand that math. Very few of us understand the detail of how computers, televisions or even telephones do what they do, yet we use them all the time. And math is fundamental to how they work. Just because we don’t understand something doesn’t mean it’s not true or real.

Preachers are often pushed to bring out “Something I can use in my life today.” But there are parts of faith that are like math and physics: hard, if not impossible to understand, that we think we don’t use or aren’t relevant to our lives today. But, to present as full a picture of our faith as possible, like math, they have to be presented.

Today’s message is about something of God that is very hard to understand, but also very much a part of the heart of Christmas, Jesus

Christ. It's meant to bring comfort – and it's comfort that I have found in the promises of God.

Lesson

A beat, a background rhythm, is built into life.

Think about all the rhythms you have around you – day and night, seasons, years – all relatively slow. Some are more frequent: medication intervals and mealtimes – though we might be making some of *those* a bit too frequent.

But you and I also operate on a more basic, intimate rhythm – our pulse. The beat of our hearts. Something so present, all the time, but still something that has to be called to our attention for us to recognize.

My sister is nineteen years older than I am, and her husband four or five older yet, so I was just a child when they were married. My brother-in-law is a biologist turned ecologist, now retired. One of the first gifts he gave me was a stethoscope.

What a wonderful tool for a seven year old to play with! A stethoscope. I loved it, used it on all sorts of things. Used it to listen to my heart, all the different noises that come from the various places that our pulse can be heard. Used it to listen to the hearts of anyone I could convince to let me, our dog... The beat of life is compelling, even to a kid.

It was also my brother-in-law who introduced me to the idea that the most attractive musical tempo is right around our heart rate – something he believed comes from our time in the womb, completely surrounded by our mother’s heartbeat, all day, every day.

A case has been made that that steady beat is our earliest, deepest, most elemental memory – a memory that’s far deeper than any other, buried so deep in our psyche that we don’t even realize it. That’s why beats around 60-80 per minute are instinctively soothing.

Now, what’s odd about all this heartbeat stuff is that I, like some of you, even though I was fascinated by my own heartbeat, also went through a phase where I hated to hear my pulse. That is, when I didn’t intend to listen to it. If I were lying down and started to notice my circulation, I’d shift my pillow and head around and around until I couldn’t hear that steady “swoosh-swoosh” that my blood made as my heart moved it around my neck and head. How about you?

There seems to be some psychological squeamishness about bodily functions, especially those that seem to remind us that we live on a very fine line, that life is fragile, and uncertain. Still, since until modern times, a stopped heart meant a stopped life, we can be forgiven an instinctive reaction to such a blatant reminder.

Okay. A fair question about now is how we can get from here to Isaiah’s vision that is our lesson. This passage is one of the great

prophecies of God's peace, repeated by the prophet Micah. And what we're about right now is relating these feelings about our fragile lives, something we don't like to dwell on, to these powerful – but seemingly outlandish - words of our Christian faith.

Well, we're celebrating this Advent that Christ is the heart of Christmas. Christ is the heartbeat of life, of salvation. Those are words that are easy to say, but harder to ponder.

God's love for us in Christ is the heartbeat of all creation.

But, just as hearing our own heartbeat can be annoying or unsettling, we don't always like to hear the heartbeat of Christ. We don't like being reminded that, at the most primal level, our lives are dependent on God. Not just ultimately – out there in the future; but fundamentally, from the very beginning right through *now*. We don't like being reminded how fragile life is – anybody remember someone who didn't want to wear seatbelts “back in the day” because, deep down, it reminded them that they could get in an accident?

Of course, not putting on your seatbelt isn't going to prevent an accident. And trying not to acknowledge that our fragile lives are in the hand of our benevolent God won't make them any more resilient, either. In both cases, the opposite is true.

The heartbeat of all life is Christ. Christ is the heart of Christmas. So, again, how does this heartbeat of Christ that suffuses all creation relate to Isaiah's vision of a world turned around?

You know – or have at least heard – the answer. Handel even set it to music in *The Messiah*, which we've all heard. From Isaiah's prophecy just a little later on, in chapter 9: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given...and his name shall be called, Wonderful Counsellor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

The Prince of Peace. Here's the key. Even in this season of Advent, a season built on anticipating God's peace, that call to peace is something we don't always like to hear, because it's so counter-intuitive. It's like that reluctance to face the fragility of life when you hear your heartbeat as you lie awake.

Peace is for wimps. We've had to fight for what we have, fight to defend that we've got it, and fight anyone who threatens it in any way. Heck, some of us have had to fight to be able to help someone else, and we've often said that we have fought so we don't have to fight any more.

But we still do fight, don't we? Sometimes, in my dark moments, I feel like we have to fight so that the most basic of care can be offered to someone else, fight for our sanity.

Isaiah's vision, right at the start of his huge prophetic work, his glimpse of hostile humans (and we haven't changed) taking our weapons, our implements of destruction and death, and making them tools of growth and life, has one key sound that must be connected with the heart of Christmas, Jesus Christ. That is the sound of the beating of swords into plows, spears into pruning hooks. That is the sound of the heartbeat of the Prince of Peace.

You see, God's vision of peace is as alien to us as the incarnation, the resurrection, any of the other central but ephemeral doctrines of our faith. We just don't get peace, peace that means – as Isaiah says a bit later – that lions will curl up with lambs, that children will play right next to deadly snakes without fear or danger in God's Kingdom, the Kingdom that Christ brings.

We can't get the idea of peace between one other, let alone different groups in a church or in the world, let alone nations, let alone that the mentally deranged and dangerously deadly could be made into our dearest and most trustworthy friends.

But that's the vision of Isaiah, and it's the reality of Christ. And it's the reality of Christmas. The beating of swords into plows and spears into pruning hooks is the sound of Christ's divine heartbeat pounding throughout the universe.

One of the most unworldly events ever recorded in modern history has to be the Christmas truce. In 1914, one hundred years ago, the world had which seemed so logical, so – inevitable and dependable and explainable – and improvable! – was turned into a sea of mud and death in the First World War. On Christmas Eve, at several points along the new normal of trenches, the pounding beat of artillery, which for too many had overpowered the heartbeat of the world, stopped. Soldiers who only a few hours before had been actively killing one another spontaneously climbed out of their filthy protection, stepped out into the unknown and dark and into a common celebration of what connected them, Christ and his birth, in spite of the deadly differences that were literally killing them, the world they knew, and millions of other people.

There. In the most unlikely place possible - an active combat zone – the incessant beat of cannon and death was silent for a time, and a few thousand very privileged men could experience the heartbeat of the world.

Even if it was for just a few hours, men who saw right in front of them every day just how fragile we are - as others they knew were blown into a red mist - were treated to a taste of the Kingdom of God.

As I said at the start, there is a beat out there –and it’s pounding throughout the universe – in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, South Chicago and even South Tucson. Just as there is evidence that we still carry our

mother's heartbeat in our most foundational memories, the Bible tells us that there's an even more basic heartbeat to creation: the beat of the heart of Christ, the heart of Christmas, the heart of the Prince of Peace.

Can we hear it? Probably not. But we can know it real, and take comfort in God's care and presence in the center of creation. Can you tune your heart to the call of God's peace, the heartbeat of the Prince of Peace?