

An elderly man decided one day that he was going to cut down an apple tree in his back yard. It was dying and never did produced good apples. He took off the branches, cut them up in small pieces, and then finally cut the tree off at ground level, leaving behind a little stump. The next summer he noticed a little branch or shoot coming forth from them stump. He decided to let it grow and see what would happen. By the fall the little shoot had grown into a small tree several feet high. The next spring there were buds on the branch, and by the end summer there were several ripe apples. He tasted one and it was the best apple he ever had. What really surprised him was how good he felt after eating the apple. His arthritis was gone, his blood pressure was normal, and even some of the blotches on his skin cleared up. He gave one of the apples to his wife. She noticed similar improved health from eating just one apple. They gave another apple to a friend they visited in the nursing home. Within a few days she was able to go home and be with her family again. And the next year, when there were more apples on the tree, the same miraculous healings took place from these miracle apples that came from the little shoot that developed from the stump of an old apple tree.

Of course, this is a not a true story, but it does illustrate for us this morning something even more miraculous. From the nation of Judah that was like a tree cut off at the ground, a little shoot or branch developed that saved the world not from diseases, but from the damning effects of sin. That little shoot from the cut off stump is none other than Jesus our Savior. He provides us with what we need more than anything else, the righteousness to be accepted by a holy and perfect God. It is what Martin Luther called an “alien righteousness.” It is something totally outside of our existence, from a whole different world, a righteousness that God provides us in Jesus, that is pleasing, and tasty and delicious and acceptable to him. This morning we want to focus on these words and speak to you about the wonderful privilege of being “Secure in Our Alien Righteousness.”

Talk about a hopeless group of people. Jeremiah spoke those words to the people of Jerusalem who were under siege by the Babylonians. Every day Jeremiah walked the streets and pleaded with people to give up the city and not be mercilessly slaughtered by the Babylonians when they breached the walls. The people did not want to hear God’s Word from the mouth of Jeremiah. They did not want to be told they were sinning against God by worshipping Baal and other false gods, even sacrificing their children in the fire to the strange gods. Jeremiah shared this message with them from the Lord, “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” These totally dysfunctional people were promised a Messiah, a righteous Branch, a Savior who could put them right with their God, and make them safe and secure in his loving arms. If only they would turn from the evil ways and trust in the promise of the Messiah. Then they could be restored and brought back to God and be safe in the palm of his hand. God’s plan was to save them with an alien righteousness.

Do you ever get tired and weary of people doing things wrong? Pick up the newspaper and read the accounts of terrorist activities and murders, or leaders who are dishonest, or sports heroes who cheat, or movies stars whose lives are filled with immorality. We are surrounded by people who don’t do things right. We experience these problems in our homes when children fight or say nasty things to parents. We see it in marriages when husbands don’t love their wives as much as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. Where we get most tired and weary

of someone doing something wrong is within our own inner being. With Paul we confess, “I know that in my that is my flesh dwells no good thing.” Imagine for a moment someone in your life who does everything right all the time. What a joy it would be to be near that person and be friends. That was Jesus. He is Lord and God from all eternity, born as a child into the tribe of Judah, perfect in everything he did. Luke 2 says of Jesus, “And Jesus grew up in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” At Jesus’ baptism, the heavenly Father said, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!”

Why did the Lord promise this righteous Branch to enter our world, to become one of us and to live the perfect lives we could not live? Merely to provide us with a perfect example would only discourage us even more. Have you ever been around someone very kind and considerate, only to realize more fully your own inadequacies and weaknesses? In the movie ET the lovable extraterrestrial creature teaches a somewhat dysfunctional California family how to get along better with each other. Jesus could have devoted his life to doing the same thing, leading by example, showing the people how to make this world a better place similar to Gandhi from India. But Jesus had a higher purpose for coming to this world. Our heavenly Father had his Son born into this world as a righteous Branch in the human race to provide righteousness that we could never gain on our own. He came to offer this righteousness to us as a free gift. “In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord our righteousness.” The Lord foretold of a time when people would be saved and through a righteousness that was not their own that came from him.

Scan the people who are around you daily as you play a round of golf with friends, go to a party held by your neighbors, at work, even in your own family. How many still live under the notion that they can produce a certain amount of righteousness or goodness in their lives that will enable God to love them and accept them? So goes the saying: “In order to get to heaven you have to live right.” A man once came to Jesus asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus told him to keep the commandments. Jesus did say not try your best. He told him to keep them perfectly. Love God with your whole heart, soul and mind, and then love your neighbor as yourself. The problem with trying to follow God’s law to make ourselves worthy is that we never measure up to what the law requires. Galatians tell us clearly, “All who rely observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’” If we do not measure up to what is in the Book of the Law, we will get the boot. That is why we need righteousness outside of us, an alien righteousness that comes from God himself, that is provided for us freely in Jesus his Son.

Remember how Martin Luther struggled with this concept of the righteousness of God. When he started reading the Bible he noticed the words “the righteousness of God” and this word righteousness scared him. He reasoned to himself that God was righteous and he had to become more righteous to be accepted. The problem was that the more he became aware of how unrighteousness he was, the more his eyes were opened to how empty he was of any hope to be accepted by God. Then all of heaven opened up to him when he realized that the just live by faith. They do not live and escape the judgment by fabricating together rags of their own unrighteousness to make themselves worthy. Luther realized a God who demands that people be righteous also devised a plan to declare them righteous on the basis of the perfect life Jesus lived and the perfect death he died.

On judgment day, when everyone stands before God, there will only be two kinds of righteousness present. There will be those who have followed the path of believing that the righteousness they produce in their lives is acceptable to God. Scripture is very blunt when it tells us how deficient this righteousness is. "There is none that does good no not one." Then there are those who will be standing before God not in their righteousness, but in the righteousness of Christ, the righteous Branch. They will hear the words, "Come you are blessed by my Father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Charles Colson told the story of being invited to visit one of the worst prisons in Brazil that had suddenly changed after it was taken over by two Christian missionaries. The prison had actually been turned over to be run by the prisoners, and it was proving to be a model prison. What was the secret? Colson was welcomed at the gate by a man who had been imprisoned for murder, and then given a tour of the facility. Every prison cell had Bible pictures and Bible passages. New prisoners were placed under the care of prisoners whose lives had been changed by God's word. The guide told Colson, do you want to see the punishment rooms? He proudly showed him the empty rooms and said there is only one prisoner still left, do you want to see him? Fearing nothing, Colson said yes. They entered the cell, and in the room they saw a cross carefully carved by the prisoners and on that cross was the twisted and tortured body of Jesus. The guide proudly pointed to Jesus and said here is the one prisoner who has taken the sentence for all of us. That's what God had promised to Adam and Eve, someone coming from the woman who would crush Satan's power. In the process of crushing Satan he would be bruised for our iniquities, beaten and hung on a cross and tortured in our place. That's our Jesus.

I am holding in my hands some rags. Picture these rags covered with grease and oil from a mechanics workshop. Now imagine a young woman sewing these dirty rags together to make a wedding dress for herself. That's how we were born into this world. We were convinced that our rags of unrighteousness could be sewn together to make garments that cover our sin and make us acceptable to God. The Apostle Paul said of his own Jewish people in Romans 10, "Since they do not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to God's righteousness." Every religion in the world teaches that you can establish your own righteousness. Only in the Christian faith do you have Jesus coming to this earth, become one of us, and living the righteous life we could not live so he could impute or transfer or credit that righteousness to us as a free gift. That's the message of the gospel that the Lord wants us to communicate clearly to all people.

How clearly the Apostle Paul speaks about this righteousness that comes from outside of us through Christ. He says of his own righteousness that he once treasured so highly. "I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ- the righteousness that comes from faith and is by faith" (Philippians 3:9). With Paul we joyfully proclaim to each other. "The Lord, the Lord he is our righteousness." We stand secure in our Alien Righteousness and joyfully await the return of our Jesus.