

Welcome everyone! It's wonderful to be with you today. So glad to have the few thousand people who are joining us online. We love you and are grateful to be able to stay connected with you through technology in the midst of all the safety measures everyone is taking. As you look around, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, isn't it? Christmas lights are showing up on a lot of houses, we had a very light snow flurry on Monday, just enough to tease us as we begin to hope for a white Christmas. Christmas music is everywhere. Home Alone is being played by at least three different cable channels at all times. And, of course, the primary way you know Christmas is close is through all the ugly Christmas sweaters out there. Just for fun, I've brought you a few of my favorite ugly Christmas sweaters: here's a traditional ugly Christmas sweater, just like Grandma used to wear. Here's one that's a little over the top. Here's one from the office, with Dwight as an elf saying "fact: Christmas is here." And though this is not necessarily a Christmas sweater, the ugliest sweater you'll see this time of the year is something like this (Patriots sweater)...isn't that hideous. It's so sad they aren't doing well this year. Just tragic.

As we come to the end of the year, we are beginning a new series today called "Hindsight's 2020." It's a phrase that has been used for a long time, in a lot of ways. Every sports team looks back at athletes that slipped to the bottom of the draft. Tom Brady was the 199th pick on the draft. Literally 198 players were taken ahead of him. He's led his team to 9 super bowls and won 6 of them. Why didn't we draft him? Hindsight's 2020. Every investor I know looks back on certain opportunities like Apple or Amazon or Bitcoin or Tesla and says, "Why didn't I get into that 5 years ago?!" Hindsight's 2020. A young lady gets on a dating app, sees this incredibly attractive picture of a man who has the perfect bio description, he says he's 6'2, is a lawyer, and goes to church every week. She's excited, they meet up or a date, turns out in real life he looks like Danny DeVito who still lives in his mom's basement. Hindsight's 2020. Sometimes you look back and you wish you knew then what I know now. How true is that for 2020. I saw this meme a few days ago...getting ready for 2020. Ready for anything. And then 2020 hit. Didn't see that coming. For many people, this has been one of, if not the hardest, years they've ever experienced. Let's look back on all that we've seen take place this year.

The year began with unprecedented wildfires burning 46 million acres in Australia. Then word of this virus in China began to hit news channels, before we knew it international travel was locked down, the economy was in a meltdown, grocery stores were empty, hospitals were full, no one could leave their houses, and no one could find any toilet paper. Schools were shut down. Sports were shut down. People's jobs were shut down. I remember talking to an older member of our church during that time, in his late 70s, and asking if he had ever experienced anything like this before in his life, and he said: "No, nothing like this." And then just as we began to feel things easing a little bit, heading into the summer months, we witnessed the death of George Floyd, suffocated under the knee of a police officer in uniform, we heard him cry out again and again, "I can't breathe, I can't breathe." That moment was like a condensed symbol for the African American community. It put into visual form the oppression and injustice many black men and women have felt for generations. And our nation took to the streets in ways not seen in 30 years. Racial tensions have not been as high as they were this summer in decades. And all of that set us up for a lovely political cycle in the fall, in which parties from both sides

catastrophized the moment and said that if their opponent won, life as we know it was going to come to an end. We saw unbelievable bias in the news media on both sides, Big Tech and social media didn't help much, conspiracy theories began running amuck, division and anxiety all over the place.

And now we are in the holiday season and the virus is at its absolute peak, we are told not to meet with family members for celebration. And many of us know a lot of people who have become very sick through this, and by now we probably know a few people who have lost their lives. One of my closest friends in the world just had to say goodbye to his father just a few days ago. One of my good friends at this church works as a nurse on COVID floors at a local hospital. He told me recently what it was like to be in the room with a gentleman who just days before was in perfect shape. He was admitted to the hospital, took a turn for the worst, and my friend had to hold up the phone for him as he said goodbye to his wife and family before he passed away. My friend said he held it together while he was in the room, but that he walked into the hallway and just broke down in tears. Heartbreaking.

We are in a very challenging moment as a culture. But we would be wise to remember this is not the first time people have experienced hardship. What I hope to do is look back on this year and all we have experienced through the lens of the book of Isaiah. I think that as we do, we'll begin to see clearly, with 2020 vision, how God has been at work in the past, where he is at work right now, and how he is calling us to respond to the moment we find ourselves in.

Let's set the stage by talking about the background of Isaiah. Isaiah 6 tells gives us the vision the prophet receive and begins with these words: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. The year that King Uzziah died was 740 B.C." And just like there was a bit of political turmoil as our nation voted on a new leader this year, their nation was in turmoil because with the death of a king, they were going to get a new leader as well. But there were two factors that compounded the challenge of their situation. First, Uzziah had not been leader the nation for 4 years or for 8 years, but for 52 years. He took the throne in 792, and under his 52 years as king, there was unprecedented economic prosperity and national security. So his death brings that into question...and the second issue all the more so. Just five years before he died, Tiglath-Pileser III became king in Assyria. The Assyrian kings before him had a policy of peace with their neighbors. He did not. He had a policy of global domination. He wanted to conquer all the nations surrounding him. So in the year 740, the same year King Uzziah died, he brought his army to the north kingdom of Israel and conquered the territory of Galilee. And they are threatening to conquer Jerusalem, too. This is the most dominant, hostile, and ruthless empire the world had ever seen before, breathing down their necks. And they were terrified. There was uncertainty and anxiety as never before...and they lived under that fear for the next 39 years, until finally in the year 701 B.C., when the Assyrian army laid siege to the capital city of Jerusalem. They surrounded the city walls so there was no way in and no way out. And they just waited there for the Jews to surrender or starve to death.

The Jewish people refused to give in. They said, "Our hope is in God, God will deliver us." In response, the general of Assyria said this to the people in Jerusalem: "Do not let your king Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The Lord will deliver us.' Have the gods of any nations ever delivered their lands from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath

and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries have been able to save their lands from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" (Isaiah 36:18-20).

Those were dark days for the Jewish people. They lived in constant fear and turmoil. Ultimately, God did deliver them. He sent a plague through the Assyrian army that killed 185,000 soldiers in one night. And their army retreated, never to return again. Even the Assyrian records tell of the instantaneous retreat from Jerusalem. But even as the Assyrian army fled, God said, another army will come after them. And when this army comes, there will be no salvation. There will be no miraculous rescue. The city will be destroyed, your inhabitants will be killed or taken captive, and you will spend 70 years in exile, living in a land not your own as slaves to other nations.

We think we've known hardship? Put yourself in their shoes. Imagine raising your family in that political and cultural climate. But here's what I want us to see: In the midst of their hardship, in the center of their darkest hour, God spoke to them and promised that he would have compassion on them.

- *Isaiah 30:18* Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.
- *Isaiah 49:10* They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.
- *Isaiah 49:13* Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.
- *Isaiah 51:3* The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.

Though his people were going to face unprecedented levels of hardship and heartache, he promised to have compassion on them, to heal them, to turn dry, arid deserts and wastelands into the Garden of Eden, to turn their weeping into rejoicing.

Now the Lord was going to do this in two ways. First, he promised to redeem them from exile and bring them back to the promised land. Which he did 70 years later. But the ultimate way he showed compassion on them came about 580 years later when he sent his Son into the world. And through Jesus, God not only had compassion on the Jewish people, he had compassion on all people. Through Jesus he not only rescued the Jewish people out of bondage and exile, he rescued all humanity out of bondage and exile.

The entire life of Jesus was a constant expression of God's compassion to a world in need. Listen to these words from Jesus' life:

- *Matthew 9:36* When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

- *Matthew 14:14* When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.
- *Matthew 15:32* Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.
- *Matthew 20:34* Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.

Throughout his entire life, wherever Jesus met brokenness, he responded with compassion. Matthew 12:20 says “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.” Which happens to a prophecy about the Messiah from what Old Testament book? Isaiah 42.

Here’s what I want us to see: compassion is core to the character of God, we see it all throughout Isaiah, and all throughout the life of Jesus. When God’s people are in distress, he shows us compassion. That is who God is. And the ultimate way he has shown us compassion is through sending his Son into the world. That is the Christmas story. God’s compassion is core, foundational, intrinsic to his nature. That’s the first take away I want us all to see. And it leads very naturally into the second take away: When others are in distress, God calls his people to show them compassion. Compassion is not just something we receive from God in our moment of need, it is something we extend to others in their moment of need. Listen to what we read in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” God gives us his comfort and compassion so we can then extend it to others. Now, it’s Christmas time, who might God be calling us to extend compassion to this holiday season? I want to share a few groups of people who we as a church family should be purposeful and intentional about extending compassion to.

Anyone who has lost someone they loved. The holidays are the hardest time of the year for people who have had to say goodbye to someone. All the memories just bombard them, one wave after the next. They are not there on Christmas morning to open presents, there is no one sitting in their seat at the table. And the emptiness in the house is symbolic of the emptiness in their heart. Three years ago, an artist by the name of Albert György was commissioned to create this sculpture in Geneva, Switzerland. It describes the inner world of those who have lost someone they loved. A picture of it was shared on Facebook, it became one of the most viewed photographs of the entire year on all of social media. Why were so many drawn to it? Because so many have felt that emptiness. We can’t fill the void left by their loved ones, but we can sit with them, we can share a meal with them, we can listen to them as they share memories and tell us stories. That’s sharing the compassion and comfort God himself has shown us.

Those who are sick. The hospitals in our town have more people in them than ever before. We have so many who are stuck at home in quarantine, and when you are sick, having someone show you love and care means the world. One of the nurses in our church tries to be intentional about every patient he cares for, he not only provides exceptional care, he also offers to listen to them and pray for them. Listen to this letter he received earlier this year from a family member of one of his patients:

Hello, I haven't met you yet but I have seen you at church and know you sit near us when we are there! My husband and I started attending the creek about 16 years ago. I wanted to reach out and say thank you because In early April, my dad went to the hospital for an emergency surgery. He ended up on a ventilator and in the hospital for 62 days. He doesn't remember much about the first part of his time there, but he has talked often about his nurse named Sam who went to The Creek, and held his hand and prayed over him. Because of COVID, no one in our family could be there. But God provided you, to be there for him when we could, to be like family to him when he needed it the most. We are so grateful for you and for your boldness to pray. Dad is alive and thriving. You played a huge role in Dad's healing, in his faith, and our 11 and 13 year old daughters saw the Lord answer our prayers. We've not been back to worship in person, but when we do I look forward to meeting you!

The power of compassion when someone is sick. Now obviously Sam is in a unique place as a nurse. Most of us can't go into hospital rooms right now, but we can all make chicken soup, or at least order chicken soup from Panera, we can all drop off flowers, we can all write a note and remind people we are praying for them. When people are sick, they need compassion. And we can step up in that moment and represent the hands and feet of Jesus.

Those who are hurting financially. This has been a hard year for a lot of people, higher unemployment numbers than any time in recent history. The stimulus helped, but for a lot of people it wore out pretty quick. I am so proud of this church family for helping folks. This year we have been able to give away tens of thousands of pounds of food. We've been able to help families in need find secure housing and pay bills. And just the past few weeks we've collected 700 gifts to give to kids in our community. One family in our church asked their extended family and coworker to help them collect gifts for our drive. He sent me this picture last week. I love being a part of a church that shows the love of Jesus to people in practical ways. What would it look like for you, or you and your family, to pray for a single mom you know who is raising kids on her own, and put a \$100 bill in her mailbox and just say: "Merry Christmas. You are loved." It could be a big tip for your waitress, it could be a generous bonus for your employees, it could be a gift to our generous ministry which helps people in need. Just this year we've already been able to give away almost \$170,000 – what a blessing. It could be countless expressions, but one thing we must be certain to do this Christmas season is show compassion to those in need.

Toward the end of his life, Jesus told his followers what the end of history will be like. He said all of humanity will stand before him, every person who has ever lived, and then they will be separated into two groups, some on his right, and others on his left. Those on his right he will look to and say, "Come, enter into eternity with me, enjoy the kingdom that has been prepared for you since the creation of the world." And all of these people, who are given the gift of eternal life say to Jesus, "Why? Why us? What did we do to deserve such a reward?" And Jesus will say to them: "When I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and

clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" What we do for those in need, we do for Christ himself.

As we look back on 2020, we see a great need for compassion. God has been compassionate to us, and he is calling us to be compassionate to others. Let's close by remembering the words of Galatians 6:2, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ."