

**“The Disappointing Invasion”**  
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)  
*A Reflection for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent*

Isaiah 35; Luke 1.46-55; Matthew 11.1-19

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If you're reading this online,  
you can see the Scripture selections by [clicking here](#).

Liam Neeson is an Irish actor. He starred in the movie *Taken*, as a retired secret agent whose daughter is kidnapped. He hunts down the bad guys. In *Taken 2*, he and his ex-wife are kidnapped. He escapes and hunts down the bad guys. In *Taken 3*, his ex-wife is murdered, he is framed for it, and he hunts down the bad guys. Lesson one: being related to this guy is not safe. Lesson two: don't be a bad guy.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine Liam Neeson, in character, auditioning to be a shopping mall Santa.

*I showed a clip from The Late Show with Stephen Colbert.  
You can watch it [here](#).*

Would you hire Neeson to be Santa?

John would have. So John the Baptizer is terribly disappointed in Jesus.

II

John knew what God's Messiah, the Christ, the future and final King of God's People would have to do.

God's People were oppressed from without. They'd experienced conquest after conquest, one empire after the next, destruction upon devastation. They were humiliated, exploited, violated and brutalized. God's Messiah would deliver them.

God's People were also corrupt from within. They were unfaithful to God. They lacked passion for God's ways. Poverty was widespread. Families were precarious. Immorality was accepted. Leaders were untrustworthy. Violence stalked their holy land. God's Messiah would cleanse them.

Finally, God's Messiah had come! That's what John had been announcing to whomever would listen: "*Here comes heaven's kingdom!*" John said. "*Get ready for it!*" That's what John had seen when Jesus came to him for baptism: "*He'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit,*" John said, "*and fire!*"

Our first Scripture reading, from the prophet Isaiah, paints our imaginations with what this

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<sup>1</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taken\\_\(franchise\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taken_(franchise))

will be like. Creation's desolate places, rejoicing. Blind eyes, seeing. Deaf ears, hearing. Broken legs, leaping. Silenced voices, singing. Creation's barren places, alive. Those exiled, abandoned, lost, caged, hunted, fleeing, imprisoned . . . all found, freed, and safely brought home. There was no way; God makes a way. All along they'll be belting out tunes, halos of joy around them, gifts of gladness showered on them, all sorrows and sighs scurrying into the night.<sup>2</sup> The glory of God!

### III

But not everyone. Those who have wronged us, shamed us, tormented us, battered us, betrayed us, murdered us . . . what will be God's good news about them? God's good news for those whose weeping souls cry out rage against them? God's good news for those whose spattered blood cries out for justice against them?

Liam Neeson's Santa: *"An eye in the sky bringing swift judgment?"*

Isaiah's promise: *"Be strong! Don't fear! Here's your God, coming with vengeance. With divine retribution God will come to save you?"*<sup>3</sup>

John the Baptizer's Messiah: *"He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out?"*

Sound good? Does our answer depend on what's been done to us in the darkness?

John is terribly disappointed.

### IV

See, John is in jail. See, someone is already on the throne. John has been denouncing him. *"He's not the real king. God will soon replace him!"* Surprise, John is thrown in prison. Soon he will lose his head.

The Baptizer's been hoping in Jesus. Some are being healed by Jesus, but more remain sick. Some are turning their lives around to follow Jesus, but most are not.

The Baptizer's been hoping in Jesus. Jesus is building a movement. But look at them. Only a few. Mostly riffraff and simple folk. Instead of setting the world on fire, Jesus has set them on the task of catching people for salvation, like they are still fishing or something.<sup>4</sup>

And look at whom they are catching.

Remember Isaiah's promise, of the holy road taking us back home? Remember who was

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<sup>2</sup> I've adapted this sentence from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation of Isaiah 35:10.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 35:4 (Common English Bible)

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary: Volume 1 The Christbook (Revised and Expanded Edition)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 505.

going to be on it? The redeemed. Remember who was *not*? The unclean.<sup>5</sup>

The Baptizer's been hoping in Jesus. But Jesus is gathering the unclean: sellouts and sinners.

The powers are still in place. Sadducees still stain the Temple. Romans still trample the holy places. Caesar still sits over his empire.

And John sits in prison. It's a strange place to be for someone who'd believed God's Messiah would set prisoners free.<sup>6</sup>

When he'd baptized Jesus, he'd been so sure. Now, from the dark of his cell, John is terribly disappointed in Jesus.

So you're not the first.

## V

Advent is for those in the dark.

If the darkness that has hold of you, the darkness that imprisons you, the darkness that is crushing and smothering you, is the darkness of oppression, the darkness of violence, the darkness of injustice, the darkness of lawlessness, the darkness of cruelty, you need God to break into that darkness.

The Advent God storms the darkness, blazes into it and drives it back. God invades the dark.

Jesus is what God's invasion looks like.

Will he disappoint you?

Probably. His invasion into your darkness, he's likely not doing it the way you expect, or hope for. His driving out of the world's darkness, he's likely not doing it the way we anticipate, likely not the way we'd do it, likely not the way we're certain it should be done, likely not a way that seems to have any hope of succeeding.

After all, look at what Jesus did. We sang about it earlier:

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 35:8 (CEB)

<sup>6</sup> See the promise in Isaiah 61:1, and Jesus' own proclamation in Luke 4.18.

*Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,  
The cross be borne for me, for you.  
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary.<sup>7</sup>*

After answering John, Jesus said: *“Blessed is anyone who is not scandalized by me.”*

Or disappointed.

God’s Messiah: born in a stable, placing himself among the lowest and the least, executed on a cross, risen from the grave in a way hardly anyone noticed, ascended from a world that’s still a mess, and whose body is now the church filled with the likes of us. Not the way we’d expect God to invade the darkness.

God has invaded the darkness. God’s way. Jesus.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>7</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> chorus of *What Child is This?* by William Chatterton Dix. Many modern versions don’t include this chorus (or the 3<sup>rd</sup>) but simply repeat the 1<sup>st</sup> after each verse.  
[www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-what-child-is-this](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-what-child-is-this)