

## Message: "The Voice" *Isaiah 40:5-11*

One of the most difficult experiences for Isaiah in his book seems to come after his perceived failure by King Hezekiah in Isaiah 39. Hezekiah had experienced 2 great deliverances by the LORD. He had been delivered from the Assyrian army and then a life-threatening illness.

Hezekiah receives envoys from Babylon for an alliance against Assyria. He shows them everything in the palace and the Temple, flattered by their attentiveness. Isaiah confronts Hezekiah about this decision to entertain the Babylonian envoys. He prophesies that the Babylonians will eventually come and sack Jerusalem and carry away the king's and Temple's treasuries.



**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
**– Character for**  
**Reflection, John the**  
**Baptist**

## Message: "The Voice" *Isaiah 40:5-11*

*Medieval stained glass window showing Hezekiah receiving the Babylonian envoys. Notice the horned helmets on the envoys suggesting "devils"*



What seems to put Isaiah off is Hezekiah's cavalier attitude once he receives assurance from Isaiah that it will not happen in his lifetime. Isaiah has invested a great deal of his hopes in King Hezekiah. He believes that Hezekiah will usher in a new era of righteousness and change. But Hezekiah deeply disappoints Isaiah and he is left to question God's intention for the future.

Living in this muddy world it seems that we are often let down by circumstances, people and causes. We fail ourselves and struggle to make sense everything.



## Message: "The Voice" *Isaiah 40:5-11*

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

3 **A voice of one calling:** "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5 **And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."** 6 **A voice says,** "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

***Series: Advent***



***Medieval stained glass window showing Hezekiah receiving the Babylonian envoys. Notice the horned helmets on the envoys suggesting "devils"***

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7 The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever."

9 You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, **"Here is your God!"** 10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11 **He tends his flock like a shepherd:** He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

*Series: Advent*



*Medieval stained glass window showing Hezekiah receiving the Babylonian envoys. Notice the horned helmets on the envoys suggesting "devils"*

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When our children were young, we began to celebrate Advent in our home. Our children have told us how much this celebration meant to each of them. In later years we would select a Christian novel centered on Christmas to share from each night and discuss. We would share scripture and then pray for friends, family and our church. They would take turns lighting the candles and leading the prayer time. It built into our thinking the transformative nature of the Gospel. This is the message that changes everything.



**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
**– Character for**  
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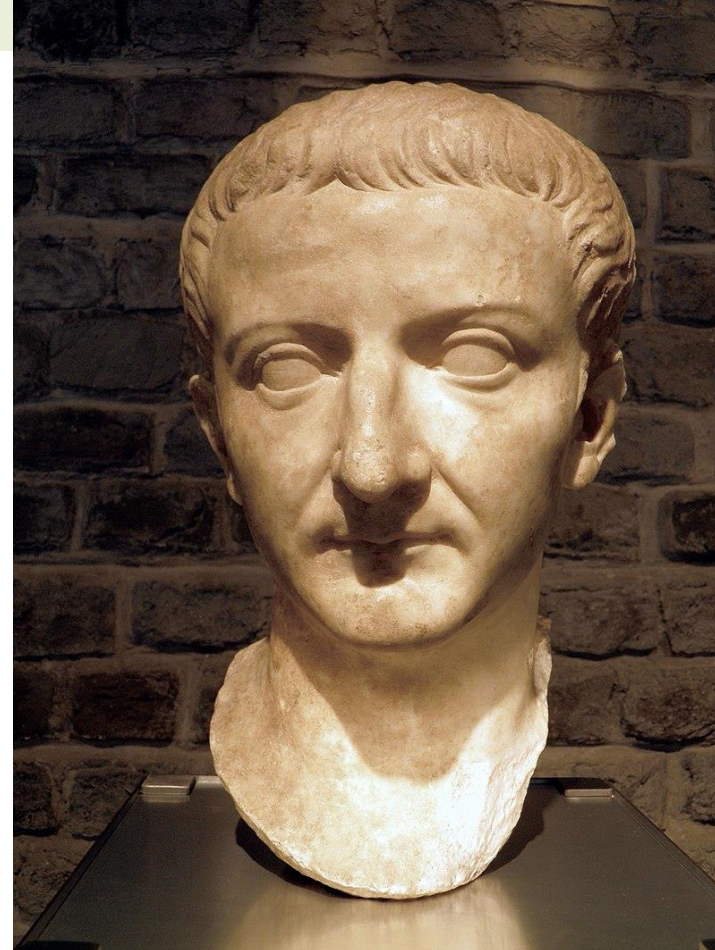
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Luke tells us that John the Baptist began his ministry in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius' reign. This is likely the year AD 26.

This is a monumental period of Roman history. Tiberius was not the 1<sup>st</sup> choice of Augustus as his heir. Tiberius had been a successful general but was generally viewed as a lackluster politician leader. His awkward political skills led to confrontations with the Senate and heavy-handed tactics with his critics.

The empire had been forged by Augustus and Tiberius was a poor substitute. *Luke 3:1-9*

*Series: Advent*



*Tiberius was Emperor from AD 14 – 37. It is likely that Luke counts his reign from AD 11 when he served as co-Emperor with his father-in-law Augustus. Below a silver "penny" from Tiberius's reign.*



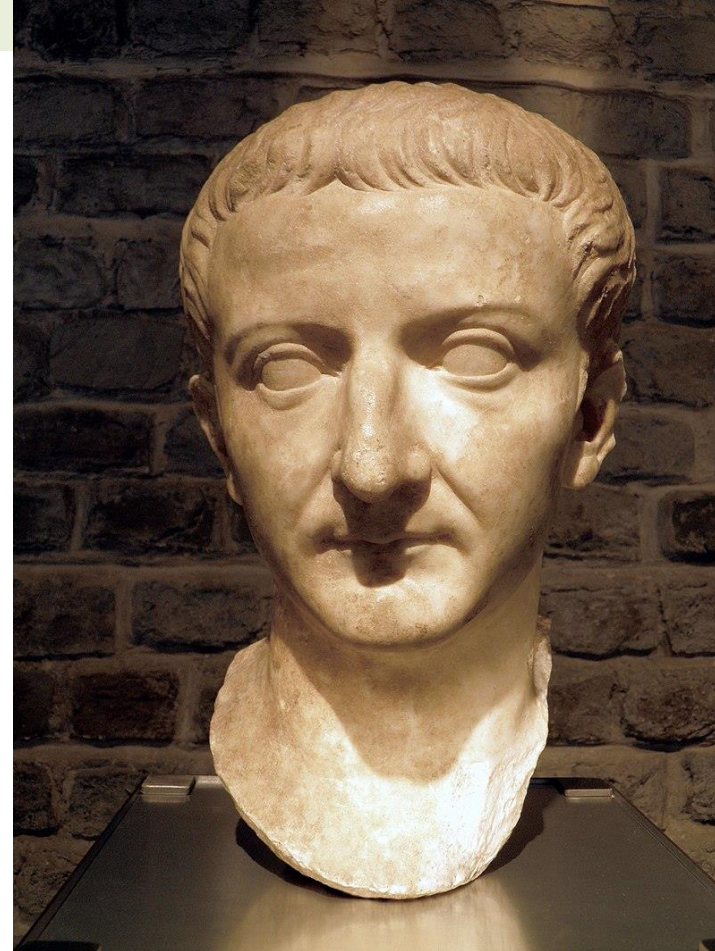


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*Luke 3:1-9*

1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, 2 while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.



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*Luke 3:1-9*

5 Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; 6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

7 Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 9 "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."



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*Saint John the Baptist [1330]  
by Jacopo del Casentino [c.  
1297 – 1358]*

*Saint John the Baptist [1597]  
by El Greco [1541-1614]*

*St. John the Baptist Preaching  
[1665] by Mattia Preti, called  
II Calabrese [1613-1699]*

I have been struck with the various ways John the Baptist has been portrayed over the centuries in Christian art. During the Middle Ages he is portrayed as an eclipsed angry figure in Christian artwork. In the period of the Renaissance he is viewed as a somewhat pathetic sufferer. With the Renaissance he is portrayed in a very complex way.



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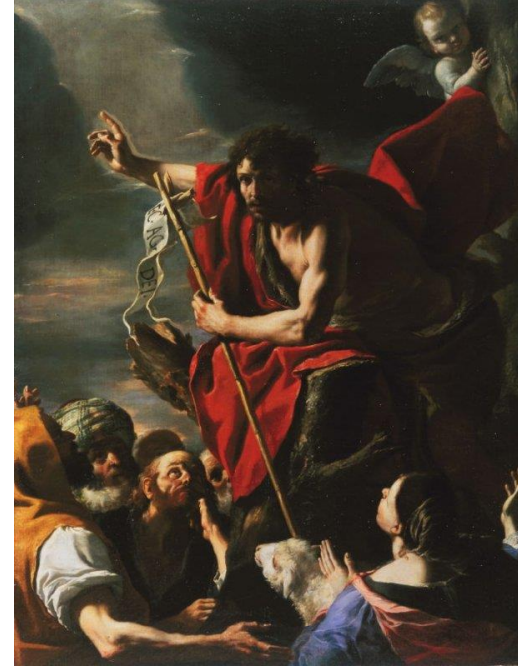
*St. John the Baptist Preaching  
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There is a focus on him in as an almost erotic male figure. The same is true of David. There is a sensual depiction that is somewhat disconcerting. As well as a fascination with the violence of his death. The Reformation era brings another revision which portrays him as a driven man who is at odds with everyone.

**Matthew 11:16-19**  
**Series: Advent**



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### **Matthew 11:16-19**

16 "But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, 17 and saying: 'We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not lament.' 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children."

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St. John the Baptist [1775] by Anton Raphael Mengs [1728-1779]

This painting of John the Baptist was completed in 1775 by Anton Raphael Mengs it was one of the last paintings completed before his death. The Romantic era shows another side to his depiction as the "reasoned messenger" in tune with nature. Our modern era again remakes his image as a wild eyed revolutionary. He is not a beguiling youth tempting us or an angry man threatening but a person on the same journey who wants the gospel to answer the struggle of human sin, frailty, death and failure. I think this painting reflects the complexity of the man John the Baptist.



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### St. John the Baptist [1775] by Anton Raphael Mengs [1728-1779]

This struggle was not only in art but in literature as well. John is pictured as an independent child watched over by the angels and the spirits of his departed parents at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Serapion, Bishop of Thumis in his colorful and highly speculative "Life of John the Baptist". This biography was based on material from Luke's birth account and the Gospel accounts of his ministry. It added information from a secondary source written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century called the "Infancy Gospel of James" [by the way this infancy Gospel of James is the source of much the doctrines of Mariology – Immaculate conception, Perpetual virginity, Assumption etc. – it was not accepted by Church leaders until well into the Middle Ages]. **John 1:19-23**



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St. John the Baptist [1775] by Anton Raphael Mengs [1728-1779]

John 1:19-23

19 Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No."

22 Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?"

23 He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the LORD,'" as the prophet Isaiah said."



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### St. John the Baptist [1775] by Anton Raphael Mengs [1728-1779]

Included in this painting are most of the symbols used to depict John the Baptist; the animal skin clothing, the red cape of martyrdom, the simple wooden staff with the cross on the top. What is missing is a lamb [John's statement of Christ being the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world]. What is unusual is the inclusion of a dead wooden stump in the foreground upon which the staff rests [Luke 3:9]. This is a reference to the beginning of John's message where he speaks of laying an axe to the root of the tree. The fact that his staff representing the gospel lays against this dead tree promises grace in repentance. John, unlike earlier depictions is not angrily gesturing to or coyly enticing the audience but he is inviting us to engage with the message. It is a powerful depiction.



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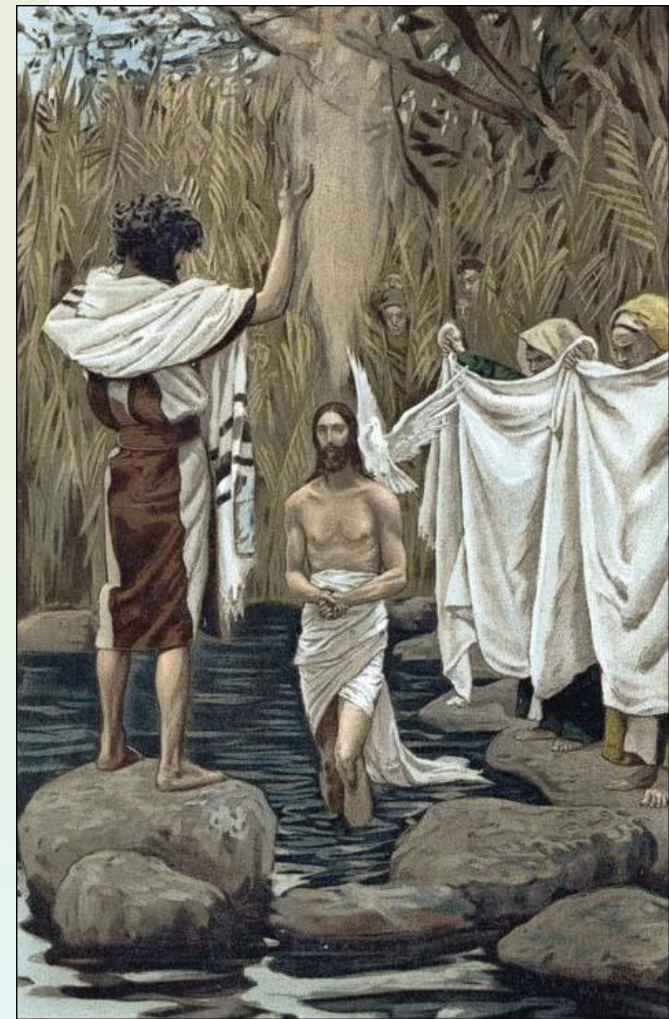
In the New Testament John the Baptist is seen as a witness to the Jewish community of the coming Messiah. His call for repentance is seen as the beginning of the gospel message. He prepares the hearts of people for the message of grace found in Christ. His message is startling.

Jesus pays John a high complement in Matthew 11 and Luke 7 when John the Baptist sends disciples to Jesus to find out if He really was the Messiah whom John had proclaimed. Jesus says of John that he is the best example of humanity, yet those who will experience the gospel will be better examples than even John.

Up until the 1950's it was impossible to imagine the development of Western culture apart from Christianity. Since the 1950's there has been a conscious effort to erase this foundation from Western culture. Without the message of the gospel we are still left struggling with humanity's propensity to sin, frailty, death and failure. *Luke 7:24-29*

John the Baptist  
Baptizing Jesus, by  
James Tissot  
*Series: Advent*

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**Luke 7:24-29**

24 When the messengers of John had departed, He began to speak to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 25 But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts. 26 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is *he* of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.' 28 For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

29 And when all the people heard *Him*, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John.

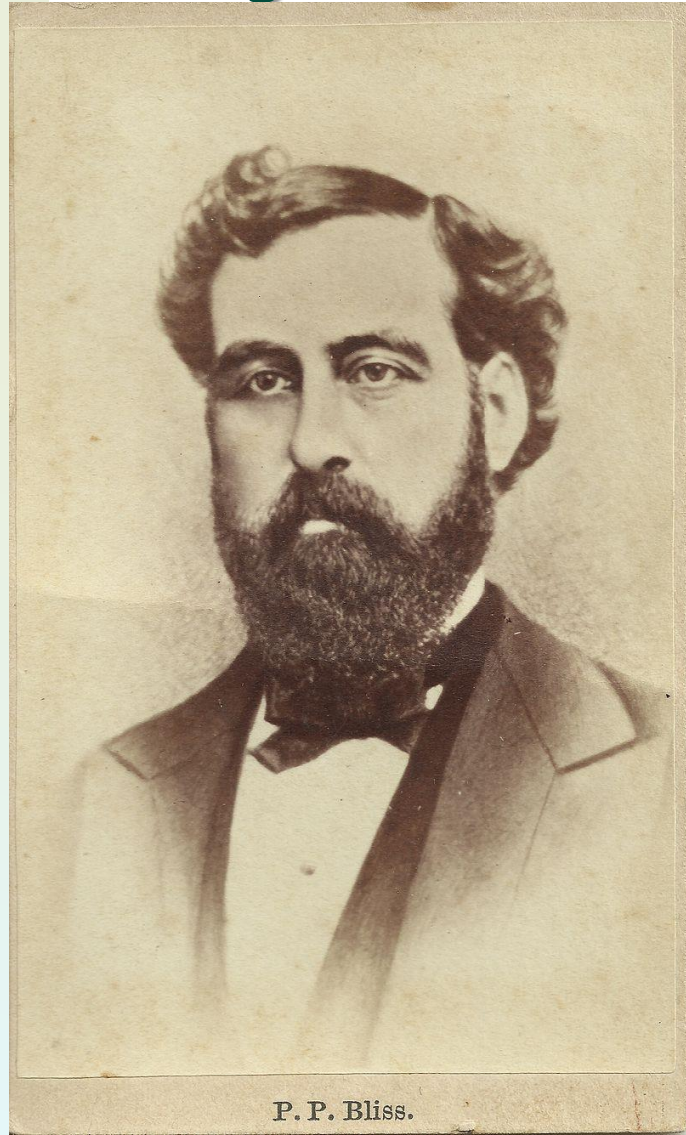
**John the Baptist  
Baptizing Jesus, by  
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P. P. Bliss.

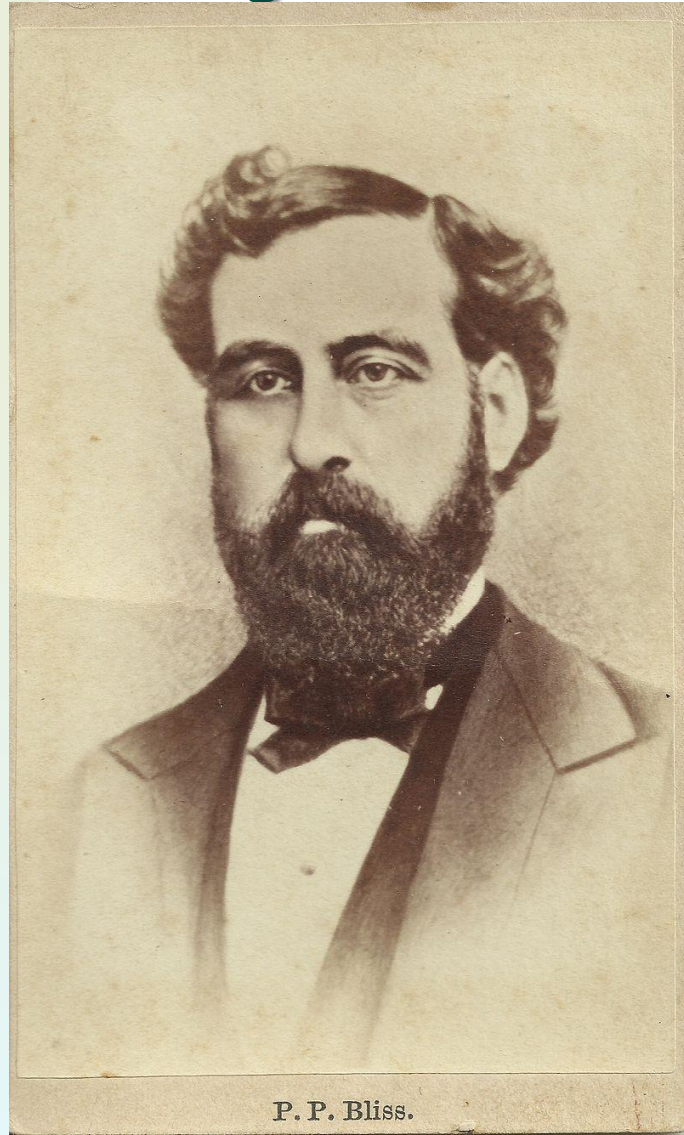
**Phillip Paul Bliss [1838-76]**

***Series: Advent***

In the 1870s a new type of music developed in Christianity coming out of the horror of the American Civil War. This music was upbeat and powerfully moving. It spoke not just to theological truth but to personal religious experience. The man who had one of the biggest roles in this musical transformation was Philip Paul Bliss [1838-1876]. He was a deeply committed Christian who was connected with D.L. Moody. He would write the tune to Spafford's poem "It is Well With My Soul". His hymns and songs would deeply influence the revival movement coming out of the Civil War. This music would give birth to the broad general term "Gospel Music" which in turn spawned many other genre of music.

He and his wife died in a tragic train accident in 1876 at Ashtabula OH. Phillip escaped the wreckage unhurt but realized that his wife was trapped in the burning wreckage and went back in to save her, they both perished along with 91 other passengers.

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Phillip Paul Bliss [1838-76]

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The last lyrics he was working on were found in his trunk which survived the crash, they had been written at the revival service. The lyrics were without a tune. A tune "My Redeemer" was written for them by James McGranahan we know the song as "I Will Sing of My Redeemer".

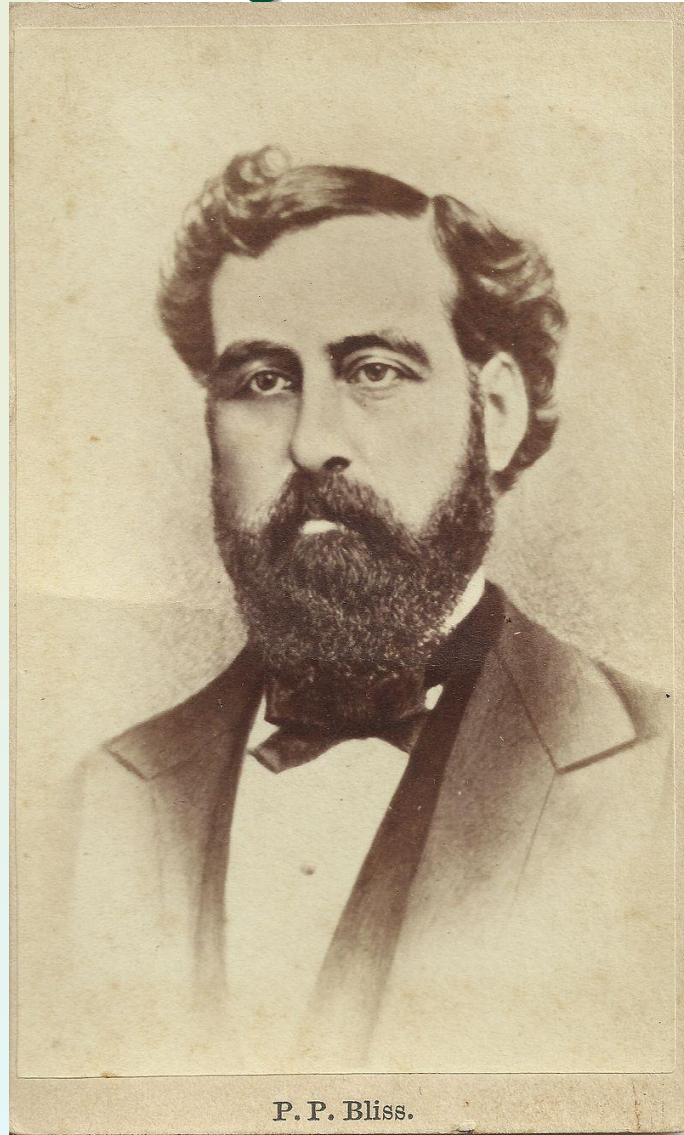
When Thomas Edison began recording phonographs, this Gospel song was the first musical recording he made. The power of "Gospel Music" was its power to unite the experience of the individual with the message of the gospel. The message of the Gospel is transformative in our lives. **Matthew 11:12-15**



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*Matthew 11:12-15*

12 "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. 13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. 14 And if you are willing to receive *it*, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 He who has ears to hear, let him hear!



P. P. Bliss.

Phillip Paul Bliss [1838-76]

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*The message of the Gospel promises the solution for human ills, but it also challenges our sinfulness.*



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