

# ***Righteousness Will Be His Belt***

## **Isaiah 11:1-10**

Wayne Eberly

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I invite you to think big this morning. I should really say the prophet Isaiah invites us all to think big this morning. And, since the prophet is inspired by God, and his words are the word of the Lord, God is the one inviting us to think big this morning. How big?

The wolf will live with the lamb big  
The leopard will lie down with the goat big

The calf and the lion and the yearling will all be together big  
And a little child will lead them big

The cow will feed with the bear big  
Their young will lie down together big

The lion will eat straw like the ox big  
The infant will play near the hole of the cobra big

The young child will put his hand into the viper's nest big

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain big  
The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord...big

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse...big  
From his roots a Branch will bear fruit...big

Isaiah envisions a world so dramatically different than any we have ever experienced that it is an understatement to say the prophet is asking us to think big. This is a whole new world that will emerge when the shoot comes from the stump, when the Branch bears fruit.

I am inviting you to think big this morning because the passage from Isaiah is envisioning the kingdom of God, and when Jesus came and began to preach, he said, “The kingdom of God is near.” I am inviting you to think big this morning by using an image that is tucked so neatly into this passage from Isaiah it is easy to miss. The image is of a belt. Halfway through the ten verses we read this morning in Isaiah 11, after the stunning image of a stump that will bear a shoot, and before the wolf lives with the lamb and the lion eats straw like an ox, in verse 5 of Isaiah 11, we read, “Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.” When we read righteousness is his belt, we have no alternative but to think big, because we are told he will judge the needy with righteousness and with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

We need to think big this morning because we live in a world filled with poor and needy. Billions of our fellow human beings qualify as poor and needy. But poverty is not only physical. Jesus came for those who are poor in spirit, for those who mourn, for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We need to think big because you can say about almost all of us that we are poor and needy. If righteousness is his belt, what size belt would this shoot that comes from the stump need if he is going to meet the needs of the poor and the needy? Think big!

For starters, it has to be at least a size two belt. There is Jesus, the shoot who came from the stump of Jesse, there is Jesus walking by sea of Galilee when he sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew. “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” They came. They followed. Two of them...two brothers. What size is his belt of righteousness? It’s a size two, Peter and Andrew. But we are just getting started because in no time at all he calls James and John. Now it’s a size four. Before you know it, he has called the tax collector named Matthew and now it is a size five belt. Notice something about the call of Matthew. Remember righteousness is the belt Jesus wears. Matthew, as a tax collector, was among a notorious group of people that took advantage of the poor and needy, overbilling them to line his own pockets and please his Roman bosses. Matthew has been a wolf preying on lambs, a leopard hunting down helpless goats. Now Matthew has been wrapped up in the belt of righteousness and his life is transformed. The wolf is living with the lamb and the leopard is lying down with the goat. Think big friends...think big.

Think big, as in numerically. This belt grows in size, from 2 and 2 and 1 until there are twelve, and then 70, and on one grand and glorious day there are 5,000, not even counting the women and children. On that day his belt of righteousness was on full display. It had been a long day of preaching. The crowd was exhausted, and famished. And so were his disciples. They said to Jesus, “Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.” In other words, let them look after themselves. Or we might say, “Who is neighbor?” Or, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Send them away is what his disciples said. But Jesus unwrapped that belt of righteousness and he began to stretch it, to stretch it far and to stretch it wide and to stretch it so every one of those 5,000, plus the women and children were wrapped up in his belt of righteousness. That day everyone ate. That day every stomach was filled. That day no one went hungry. That day there were no haves and have nots. Everyone had enough. Righteousness will be his belt. Think big friends...think big.

Think big...as in reconciliation. That disciple named Peter tried to think big. Peter thought he was thinking big when he came to Jesus and showed Jesus the belt he was working on. It had seven notches in it. Not bad. Peter asked Jesus, “How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me?” He showed Jesus his belt with seven notches. This many times? Seven times? Peter tried to think big. I wonder how many of us would agree with Peter? Seven times is pretty big when it comes to forgiveness. Peter held up his little belt and asked if seven was a big enough size when it came to forgiveness. Jesus slowly slipped his thumbs into his own belt of righteousness and said, “How about seventy-seven times.” Some translate the words of Jesus as seventy times seven. Think big friends...think very big.

In fact, when it comes to forgiveness, we might never be able to think big enough. If Jesus just told Peter to forgive seven times seventy, that alone would be hard to grasp. But Jesus did more than tell Peter to forgive seventy times seven. The belt of righteousness Jesus wears covers all. When Jesus died on the cross, for the forgiveness of sins for this entire world, it was not just for seventy times seven. Jesus died for all of us, for all who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, for all who have gone astray. Paul understood as well as anyone the belt of righteousness Jesus wore. Paul wrote that when Christ wrapped his belt of righteousness around this broken and sinful world, he was “not counting our sins against us.” (II Corinthians 5:19) When it comes

to forgiveness, the belt of righteousness Jesus wore begs us to think big...to think so big we see God's loving mercy wrapping up this whole world.

And it was to the whole world that Jesus directed the attention of his disciples. Jesus had suffered. Jesus had died. By the mighty hand of God Jesus had been raised from the grave, triumphant over sin and death. When Jesus had risen from the dead, he gathered his disciples to his side and held up his belt of righteousness. Oh, by then the belt had grown in size. Now the belt was so big it could reach out and embrace this whole world. Holding that belt of righteousness, Jesus stretched it one final time and said, "Make disciples of all the nations..." All the nations. Think big friends...think big.

To think big then is to recognize the size of the belt is such that it includes all people, all the nations. To think big is also to learn from Jesus what his intention is in embracing the whole world. As his belt of righteousness embraces this whole world, he is establishing his kingdom of righteousness. Remember, his kingdom is for the poor and needy. For those who have been excluded he tears down dividing walls of hostility. Again, it is the Apostle Paul who proclaims the good news that comes with Jesus, "There are no longer strangers and aliens." No! Jesus has torn down every dividing wall of hostility. In our baptism, the divisions of race and gender and sexism are erased, they are eliminated, they are swept away. We experience new creation, where all of us are simply children of one God, the God who loves us so much he has sent Jesus to be our peace, to be our righteousness, to be our Lord, to be our Savior, to be our Friend, to be our salvation.

The commitment Jesus had to righteousness and justice for the poor and the needy led him to tell one of the most gripping parables ever told. People will be divided at the end of days. It will be a time to sort things out, to find out who has shared in this ministry of righteousness. Jesus will divide the people into two camps. To one group he said, "Come to me, you are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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."

This is such a powerful parable because as Jesus speaks all the people have a blank expression. They never saw Jesus once in this whole time as they were doing all the things the righteous do. They say to Jesus, “When? When did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison?” Jesus, the one who came to bring righteousness to the poor and needy answers them, “Whenever you did it to the least one of these, you did it unto me.” Yes, Jesus has a belt of righteousness big enough to wrap up the whole world. But never forget it is a belt that intends to wrap up the very least ones who are so quickly forgotten or ignored or excluded or neglected. To think big like Jesus is to think small, so small you notice the very least ones in our world. Think that kind of big friends...think that kind of big.

And think big by thinking of the children, the little ones. Once again, the disciples could not think as big as they needed. Children came to Jesus. The disciples shooed them away. Too busy. Too much to do. Too many other important people and ministries and priorities. Keep the children away. Can't you see Jesus unbuckling his belt at that very moment? “Let the children come to me.” He who came for the poor and the needy knows how much children need to be embraced and welcomed and cared for and encouraged and loved, and loved, and loved, and loved.

My dad had a pretty big belt. It had five notches in that belt for the five kids in the Eberly family. He had plenty to keep him busy and occupied and stressed and concerned. Plus, he was a teacher. And he ran a YMCA camp. My dad had a pretty big belt. Then his good friend Mr. Knudson passed away. Mr. Knudson was 40 years old. Mr. Knudson had two young kids. Mr. Knudson died in the fall of 1979. That Christmas my dad looked at his belt and somehow decided a size five belt was not big enough. He put in two more notches until he had a size seven belt.

He called up Mrs. Knudson and said he was taking the Eberly kids to Disneyland. He wondered if Mrs. Knudson would mind if he took her two children with us. I don't know that I have ever been prouder to call my dad “My Dad” than on that trip to Disneyland, as Robbie and Julie rode with us. Jesus had a belt of righteousness and he included the poor and the needy, whoever that might be, wherever they might be, whenever they needed that touch of grace and mercy.

Maybe that is why my heart melts when some of you do the things you do. We have some kids in our church who have lost parents. One of you took a kid with you to your job and showed him around the seaport. One of you took a boy out fishing. A couple of you loaded a young boy up and took him to Fenway Park to watch the Red Sox. Several of you reached out to a young girl who lost her mom, taking her shopping, to movies, to sleepovers. Your belt was already stretched pretty good, but somehow this man named Jesus helped you to think big, to think bigger, to love more, to love deeper.

The beloved Christmas movie about a miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> street has Kris Kringle leaving his cane behind as a reminder of the joy of Christmas. This year imagine a belt has been left behind. The belt has been left behind by Jesus.

- You went to take some slips for the reverse offering, and you knew you could only do so much...and then you saw a belt...and you thought just a little bigger. Because of that nearly 400 people had a thanksgiving meal through Jonnycake.
- You went to grab some cards from the Angel Tree and you knew you could only do so much...and then you saw a belt...now you might even add a book in so that a child will have the chance to have a loved one read them a story.
- You saw an announcement for Habitat, or the Warm Dinner, or the Christmas Dinner...you read a prayer concern...you know someone who is hurting, alone, searching, watching, waiting...you are not sure if you should or shouldn't, if you have time or you don't...and then you see a belt. You see a belt. You see a belt and you think of the one wore a belt of righteousness and justice for the poor and for the needy. Remembering the one who said, "When you did it for the least of these you did it unto me" you stretch your belt just a little wider and you answer the call.
- You heard about a trip to Ghana...and that's a big commitment, a costly commitment, a huge step out of your comfort zone, an interruption of your summer plans...and then you saw a belt...and you thought just a little bigger, well, a lot bigger, and like that prophet Isaiah himself you said, "Here I am, Lord, send me."

Now I'm not suggesting we are ready yet to wrap a belt around a wolf and a lion and leopard and get all snuggly with predators. Someday God will do that, and it will be an amazing day. But today, as followers of the one who buckled the belt of righteousness around his waist, a belt that was so big it has wrapped up this whole world, as followers of the one we call Lord, whenever we see his belt, may we say, "Maybe I can make my belt just a little larger, just a little bigger, so that someone who is need can experience the warmth and the welcome that comes from being embraced in the loving care of Jesus Christ."