

Wednesday, December 7, 2022 – Midweek Advent II

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (ESV) – “Waiting with Joy”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed. I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.”

Merry Christmas! Well, at least it will be in a couple of weeks now. This is the second-most important day in the Christian church year – the birth of Jesus the Messiah in the manger of Bethlehem. The only day that makes Christmas pale in comparison is the day of Easter, the day when He rose from the dead on the third day, after being crucified for the sins of the world. We are told by retailers and other secular forces that we are supposed to be happy this time of year; we are to be glad to be with families and friends, to give gifts to each other and, oh, yes, keep spending money in the stores that sponsor the ads that we see on television and on the internet. But, every time you turn around, it seems that there is yet another assault on the true meaning of Christmas in the larger society. We've stopped being surprised at the folks that protest having nativity scenes in public places; this fight was lost by the Christian forces long ago. But now, we even have the forces that seek to push Christianity out of the public square declaring war on Christmas trees, as one state's governor did a few years ago. Even though the Christmas tree doesn't have much historical attestation to be connected to Christmas and was only brought into the church by Martin Luther to remind us of God's eternity and ever-present nature, the very name Christmas is under attack by many who would seek to instill secularism and tolerance in our greater society.

Now, it's true that these mentions of Christian symbols at this time of the year might make those who aren't Christian uncomfortable, but I wonder if the disconcertment is more from those who have no use for religion at all. They want to be joyful at this time of year, but they are seeking after futility and a peace that will not last. The only reason for joy in this sinful world is the joy that comes through the knowledge that Christ the Lord has come to redeem His people from their sins. That's what we are preparing for during this blessed season – the coming of the Christ Child, the One Who would grow up to be crucified and buried, and Who would rise again

on that first Easter day. Without this work of Jesus on our behalf, and a respect for and acknowledgement of this event, it's no wonder that the celebrations ring hollow to those who seek out a Christ-less Christmas. It's no wonder that when families get together and haven't spent much time together for the rest of the year, that strife and infighting become rampant. Those who work in hospitals and public safety tell us that the "Holiday Season", as the secularists prefer to call it, is filled with a lot of generous giving, but is also when families get into the most fights, and the level of domestic violence ramps itself up. Now, I'm not saying that Christian families don't get into fights (they do!), but the fact of the matter is that if we're looking for joy this time of year, and don't find it in Christ, we're going to be looking for something that's difficult if not impossible to find.

In our text for tonight's discussion, Isaiah reminds us of the reason that we have to rejoice this time of year – Christ. In case you were thinking that Isaiah couldn't have meant Jesus, because he was writing over 900 years before His birth, think again – Jesus Himself interprets this prophesy concerning Himself. That's why He was so unpopular when He opened the scroll in the temple of Nazareth, when He spoke there for the first time – He said that He Himself was the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. I can imagine that a few jaws figuratively, if not literally, hit the floor at this statement from the mouth of our Savior. The people were conditioned to think that the Savior would come with pomp and circumstance, like a king, not like this lowly child of Mary and Joseph, and from of all places, Nazareth. Remember – nothing good could come from there, the people said. He started the unpopular teachings that continue to this day and continued the controversy that we witness even now when we state the truth of the Scriptures – that Jesus is the One and only Savior, the ONLY way to heaven! There is no negotiation in this truth – salvation is not possible except through Jesus the Christ, the Son

of God. This is unpopular, and in some countries, will get you thrown into jail for the crime of intolerance, but this persecution doesn't make Isaiah's words and the rest of the prophecies of Scripture any less true. In fact, we are told in the Scriptures that persecution WILL come; it's not a matter of when it will come, but to what degree and at what point in our lives it comes.

You see, the world hates Jesus because He represents a debunking of the theory that we can save ourselves from our sins, that there is something left within us that enables us to choose God on our own. We don't want to admit that we are sinful and unclean, helpless to save ourselves and destined for the fires of hell because of our sins and our sinfulness. We are captive and held in the prison of condemnation because of our sins; we cannot free ourselves. We don't even know the true meaning of the word joy outside of the revealed Word of God in the Scriptures. The human emotion of happiness doesn't even pale in comparison to the joy that comes from knowing that our sin problem is taken care of, of knowing that our eternal destination is secured for us by Jesus' work on our behalf.

Isaiah recounts the reasons for the joy that lies within us at this time of year. I won't even try to do better than he does, or to go into more detail, because these words are quite familiar to us. The point is that we are freed from the guilt of our sins because of Jesus' coming; without His Advent, we would be hopeless and would have no reason to continue on in this sinful world. The people of Isaiah's day were looking for a temporal salvation, an improvement of their earthly lot, a restoration of the earthly Jerusalem that had been destroyed because of their unbelief and abject sinfulness. They missed the boat; they looked for joy in a place that there was no joy to be found. They looked for a Savior that was nothing like the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. In the same way, the people today that are trying to secularize Christmas into a good meal with family and friends, lots of spending to keep the economy and the retailers happy, and a

sense of niceness and kindness that lasts for a couple of weeks (if we're lucky), are not only missing the boat, but are also probably a little bit angry and miffed at those of us who know and proclaim the Reason for the Joy of the Season, Jesus our Redeemer. That's why they seek to do what we all try to do to the things of God – if we can't totally silence them, then we water them down and bring those who are joyful down to the pit of despair that we dwell in without Jesus.

As it is said, misery loves company, and this couldn't be more true for those who live without Christ – life is totally miserable. Thanks be to God that He works in and through each and every one of us to spread the reason for the joy that is within us this Christmas season that is coming in just a few short days. Even though we're still in the season of Advent, or preparation, the important point is what we are preparing for – the coming birth of Jesus the Christ in the manger at Bethlehem. More important than just His coming, however, is what He came to do – He came to die. He came to give life to us by His rising again. He came to give hope to a world that is hopeless without His coming. He came to give joy in knowing that our sin problem is taken care of, and joy in knowing the true reason for His Season – Christmas. So, Merry Christmas! Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.