

Third Sunday in Advent December 11, 2011

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11 “Joy to the World – the Lord is Coming!”

Last week, Pastor George reminded us to “Just do it!” in our commitment to prepare for Christ’s return by turning in repentance from sin to the forgiveness that Christ holds out to us. Then our lives will bear the fruits of repentance, and we will also be prepared for Christ’s return. This week our readings urge us to prepare our hearts with joy because the Lord is coming again.

What a world God came into when Christ came down. Isaiah writes about those who are poor, the brokenhearted, captives, those in prison, and those who mourn. And I think to myself how real these problems are to people in our own time at this time of year. Already this Advent season I have officiated at two funerals, and another death in the congregation is expected any day now, that of Eddie Graefe. My wife just attended the funeral of a cousin in Frederick County, and others of you have attended the funeral of a friend or family member in recent days. Death is just one of the real problems the people of Isaiah’s time had to deal with, just as we do.

Seasonal depression and broken hearts, also, are very common at this time of year for many reasons. Sometimes people don’t look forward to Christmas because those people who once made it meaningful for them are no longer around, such as when kids grow up in a family and then move away and begin their own families. Or maybe it is the decrease in light which our bodies need as the days grow shorter that contribute to depression. I recently saw an advertisement for light bulbs in which I was told to replace my fluorescent and soft white bulbs because they don’t give you the kind of light your body needs for your physical and emotional health. The old, regular bulbs we grew up before today’s light bulb innovations were healthier for us. I don’t know if that is true or not, but maybe I ought to try that.

Isaiah also writes about those who are poor, captive, or in prison. It might seem that our society has been taken captive by the commercial nature of Christmas today, and it can leave some people feeling like they are in prison when they don’t look forward to or they dread the coming season. It can leave many people feeling guilty or bad if they are not able to meet the financial demands of the season. On the other hand, there are others who look forward to the gift-giving of Christmas, and it lays no financial burden on them. (By the way, thank you to my secret pal who has once again surprised me with a very generous Christmas gift and left no clue as to who he or she is. You are very clever!) How depressing these low moments may feel on the one hand, but on the other hand Isaiah writes that this will all change when Christ comes. And, of course, Isaiah has in mind more than the fleeting troubles of this life. He has in mind the deeper spiritual issues that trouble all of us – our poor, spiritual condition due to sin, and the sin that can captivate us and burden us at any time of year.

Isaiah writes about the Messiah who is coming, but who we know has come already for us in his first coming. Isaiah tells us that the Holy Spirit will empower the ministry of Jesus Christ so that he will bring complete healing to our broken spirits and world. Jesus comes to comfort broken hearts and those who mourn. He brings freedom to those who are captivated or imprisoned by sin. He comes to speak good news to those who feel spiritually poor. He comes to lift our spirits and to return joy to our lives.

There is joy for our world today because Christ came to repair our broken creation. The creation was made in perfection; but then the creation fell and was broken in that brief moment when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. When Christ entered our world at Christmas, he offered himself as the carpenter to rebuild the broken ruins and cities of our world and hearts. He took our sins and broken spiritual condition that separate us from God and leave us broken down, and he became a broken, sinful person on the cross in our place. He was devastated at the cross when the wrath of God for our sins was directed at him. He became the broken, poor, captivated, sinner in our place on the cross. He became sin.

Jesus was able to carry our burden to the cross because he is the divine Son and certified agent of the Heavenly Father. His journey to the cross was successful because the guilt for the world's sin was completely satisfied at the cross for us. When the sacrifice was complete, he submitted to death and was buried for three days. On the third day he rose again from the dead. He announced that our broken creation was now restored, and sin, death and the devil no longer had power over us to destroy.

Praise God and Joy to the World because these things no longer have power over us. Jesus has given us the forgiveness for our sins that he won for us at the cross. He has also clothed us with new spiritual clothing. Just as we might at this time of year shop for a special outfit to wear at Christmas, Christ covers us with his own robe of righteousness so that we can stand before God in heaven without fear of whether we have done enough on the day when Christ returns. We can be confident because part of Christ's work was to keep the 10 Commandments perfectly for each one of us. His obedience becomes our obedience. You are covered in the righteousness of Christ!

However, we are works in progress until Christ returns. While Christ has worked out our salvation for us through his life, death, and resurrection, God wants other people to see what he is working in us. Isaiah writes about us: "All who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed." When people look at you, do they see the beautiful new creation you are becoming in Jesus Christ?

St. Paul reminds us in the second reading to "hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." He also writes to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances." Every word that comes from our mouths and every deed we commit is a witness to someone else of who we are in Christ Jesus. In order to give a good witness to others, and so that they will want the new life that God gives in Christ, we must do our best to do and say the things that are consistent with God's will for us in the commandments. While we have the entire forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ, and his righteousness, God's Holy Spirit is working in us the changes in our lives that are necessary as our lives are conformed to the image of Christ.

And this brings us to the final verse of Isaiah's message: "The Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations." The joy that God has given us in Jesus Christ is for all people; and whether we feel a tie to every single person in the world or not, we are in the same spiritual boat. We are related to every single person in the world by virtue of our common ancestors – first in Adam and Eve, second through Noah and his wife. We are tied to each other as one people and as sinners.

Christ died on the cross for people whom we like, dislike, and those with whom we have no personal attachment or obligation. God desires that all people be saved and come to knowledge of the truth. God is causing the righteousness of Christ in people to sprout up before all the nations. God is using the witness of people like you and me to lead other people to know Christ's forgiveness and righteousness.

We can bring God's joy to the world when we share the message of Christ with others; and when we are successful in our witness, then we can rejoice with the angels in heaven.

While no one can live in a constant state of happiness, the Christian's joy is not dependent upon the circumstances of our lives being as we desire. Our joy, like our hope, rests in Jesus Christ. Our joy is in the anticipation of His return to claim the people for whom He died and rose again.

soli deo gloria