

Rejoicing Greatly

Third in a Series of Four Sermons: “Getting Christmas Right”

December 10 and 11, 2022

Isaiah 35:1-10 and Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.”

Matthew 11: Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

Dear friends in Christ,

Here’s a letter a woman named Sharon from a small town near The Villages wrote to the Editor:

You people have no business thinking of the non-Villages residents as “outsiders.” We were here in these “used to be rural towns” long before you showed up. You’ve destroyed our small towns and cattle farms and poisoned our southern hospitality with your nasty Yankee dispositions.

So many of our locals have moved to north Florida areas, to escape the continuous destruction and devastation you have caused. Nothing would make the majority of us happier than to see you get on those planes and go back to wherever you came from.

I feel sure this letter will never see anything but a trash can, but it sure makes me feel better to have written it. (I am born and raised in Florida, and that used to make me proud.)

Yikes! It seems as though Sharon hasn’t quite found her Christmas spirit. Makes you wonder how many native Floridians feel that way about us Yankees from up north.

Our sermon series in this Advent season has the overall theme, “Getting Christmas Right.” Next weekend, our theme is “Magnifying Jesus.” Last weekend it was “Repenting Sincerely.” Two weekends ago, our theme was “Staying Awake.” Today, our theme is “Rejoicing Greatly.”

Obviously, there are two kinds of joy in the air these days. There's worldly joy and then there's distinctively Christian joy. Worldly joy is when Tom Brady throws two touchdown passes in the final three minutes to defeat the dreaded New Orleans Saints in dramatic fashion, 17-16. Distinctively Christian joy is when Jesus Christ is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Worldly joy is when families and friends get together for wonderfully festive meals. Distinctively Christian joy is when hurting and troubled and guilty sinners eat and drink at the Holy Supper, and as they do so, Jesus holds them close, their sins are sent away, and their pastor invites them to depart in peace. Worldly joy is when we listen well and get along with each other. Distinctively Christian joy is knowing that God listens closely to every one of our heart's desires and has a plan to prosper and heal.

Three lessons we would learn today about the exuberant joy of God's people getting Christmas right. 1) *In Christ, we have good reason not to be afraid.* 2) *In Christ, miracles are near.* 3) *In Christ, we have a safe highway to travel.*

• *In Christ, we have good reason not to be afraid.*

Not too far away, there is a dear Christian woman who is having a hard time rejoicing greatly. Her husband is in ICU, his femur is broken, his brain has a bleed in it, he struggles to breathe on a ventilator, she has good reason to be afraid of what tomorrow might bring. But in the quiet of the night, Jesus whispers, "Let not your heart be troubled. You believe in God. Believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions. I go there to prepare a place, that where I am, you may be also." She listens carefully, and as she does so, her fears give way to a faith that was planted in her heart at her mother's knees, decades ago.

Not too far away from her is a marriage where husband and wife are having a hard time rejoicing greatly. In the good old days, they could talk about anything. These days, it seems as though they can't talk about anything without making things worse. He feels unappreciated, and she feels unloved. He feels as if he can't do anything right, she wonders if he still cares for her. Both fear what the New Year might bring their way. But every night as they close out the day in prayer, they hold hands, they pray the Lord's Prayer, they hear the prophet Isaiah speaking, "Say to those with an anxious heart, be strong, fear not. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the guilt of your sin and the power of your sin and the eternal consequences of your sin." They listen carefully, and as they do so, their darkness fades away in the presence of Christ, God of gods, Light of Lights, very God of very God.

In the days of Isaiah, the nation of Judah was having a hard time rejoicing greatly. Soon, they would be taken away into exile. Their economy would be destroyed, their days of luxury would give way to slavery, their oppressors would brutalize their men, women, and children for decades. They had every reason to be afraid, and yet Isaiah reassures them that their God would come with vengeance, in due time, God would come and save them.

In today's Gospel lesson, John the Baptist was having a hard time rejoicing greatly. He had good reasons to be afraid. He was in prison, and soon He would be executed. He had preached repentance and the judgment of God with all of his heart and all of his soul and all of his mind. But instead of bringing God's wrath about the cruel oppressors of God's people, Jesus seemed to be all about kindness and patience. What's going on here? Was Jesus the promised Messiah, or should they look for another? Which brings us to our second clue to getting Christmas right.

In Christ, miracles are nearby

Getting Christmas right is about having distinctively Christian joy in the midst of a world where our lives are far from perfect, our attitudes are up and down like a yo-yo depending on our circumstances, and our moods can go from terrific to terrible at the drop of a hat.

A second clue for getting Christmas right is to know that in Christ, miracles are never far away. Isaiah pictured the coming of Christ as an era where the eyes of the blind would be opened, the ears of the deaf would be unstopped, the lame man would leap like a deer, and the tongues of the mute would sing for joy. Christmas joy is symbolized by streams of water flowing through a desert, a parched land now dotted with pools, and lush vegetation replacing the dry and the desolate.

Lutheran Christians are famous for ***rejoicing greatly***. True or false?

Just for the sake of argument, let's accept the premise that we have those days when we don't really have the "joy, joy, joy, down in my heart. Down in my heart down in my heart. I've got the joy joy joy...."

Why is that? Perhaps it is that good news doesn't always seem like good news. Suppose you went to the dentist for a routine cleaning and checkup. You're sitting there after the examination, and in comes the dentist with good news. The good news is that if you come in once a week for the next four weeks and pay me \$4000 or so, I can fix you up and everything will be just fine! It is good news that your

teeth can be fixed, but you have to understand the problem before the solution sounds like good news.

Or perhaps your mechanic tells you that a repair you didn't even know you needed will only cost you \$1800. It is in fact good news that you didn't have car trouble in the middle of a busy freeway, it is good news that you didn't cause an accident and you didn't have to get your car towed, but you have to believe the mechanic's diagnosis before you will be able to rejoice in the plan for repair.

So also in Isaiah's day. When the prophet described the joy of returning from exile, the people weren't even in exile. They were living quite nicely, quite comfortably. Their economy was strong, their family gatherings were full of eating and drinking and being merry. And they weren't in the mood for repentance and the need for changing their ways. They had to hear the bad news of chapter 34 before they could rejoice greatly in the good news of chapter 35.

So also for us church goes as we try to get Christmas right in the year of our Lord 2022. The grace of God is amazing only when we recognize how far we have fallen short of His glory in our thoughts, in our conversations, in our routines, and in our decisions. The mercy of God will be cause for great rejoicing only when we realize how undeserving we are by nature and on our own. The truths of God's Word will set us free only as often as we confess the prisons that are holding us back.

Dear friends, whatever is holding you back from living free and at peace and with distinctively Christian joy, bring it one more time to the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb of your Savior. At His manger, we rejoice in the miracle of Incarnation. At the cross, we rejoice in the miracle of forgiveness. At the empty tomb we rejoice in the miracle of new life, new attitudes, new directions.

In Christ, we have a safe highway to travel.

This past week, three stories of animals attacking humans caught my attention. One story came from Los Angeles, where a coyote grabbed a two year old girl. He bit down on her legs. He dragged her screaming and facedown on the sidewalk. Her father rescued her

A second story comes from Connecticut, where a five year old girl is sitting on her porch, waiting for the school bus to pick her up. At which time a raccoon, possibly rabid, attacks her. Her mom promptly fights off the raccoon on her behalf.

A third story from July at Keaton Beach, 95 miles from here tells of a 17 year old girl from Perry, Florida, scalloping with a friend. A shark attacks her, and her leg would be amputated.

Makes you not want to go scalloping, or to Connecticut, or to California.

In Isaiah's day, certain roads between temples were open only to those who were ceremonially clean. In our text for today, the prophet describes the narrow road of salvation as a Way of holiness that is safe. A road where no wild beasts will attack and redeemed and precious souls are welcomed to travel. Jubilant songs are on their lips, including songs like Hark the Glad Sound and Joy to the World and Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee and even the one our organist picked - The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns.

Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. Joy and gladness shall overtake them, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

In other words, they will be getting Christmas right. Not perfectly, mind you. They will have their average days, their good days, and their really great days. On their average days, they will get off on the shoulder of the road, maybe even stumble into the ditches on one side or another. On those days, they will lose perspective and occasionally lose their temper over situations that really don't matter.

On their good days, they will look into the mirror of God's Law, they will recognize their faults, and as they confess their shortcomings, a new and beautiful sense of peace will rise up inside of them.

On their really great days, by the grace of God and power of the Holy Spirit, they will live life in such a way that others are attracted to Christ and His Church.