

## Sermon for December 17, 2023 – Advent 3

Isaiah 61:1-3 (EHV)

### Theme: Jesus is the Joy of Christmas

*<sup>1</sup> The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the afflicted. He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for those who are bound, <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance for our God, to comfort all who mourn, <sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion, to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, a cloak of praise instead of a faint spirit, so that they will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD to display his beauty.*

The “Christmas season” is in full swing with all its music, parties, sales, and family gatherings. But do you know what else is in full swing? Christmas depression. Why is that? Some people attribute it to the lack of sunlight and colder temperatures. But even if all these physiological reasons can spark seasonal affective disorder, I also believe that the Christmas blues often have another cause: faulty expectations.

Our culture places a huge emphasis on “the feelings” of this season without understanding where true Christmas joy comes from. Many think Christmas merriment is derived from family gatherings. Other people try to find it in the holidays' physical sights, sounds, smells, and flavours. Still, others seek to find the meaning and happiness of Christmas in the generosity of the human spirit.

But the truth is that none of these things offer us lasting joy. Christmas trees lose their needles. Christmas lights burn out. Family members go home. People stop giving and helping others, imagining they did enough over the holidays. There is no substance to any of these things.

So, is Christmas nothing more than a meaningless, feel-good holiday? We Christians know that this is not the case. The true meaning of Christmas offers an everlasting joy that no disease, disaster, death, or devil can ever take away. Let us, therefore, use our sermon text from Isaiah to focus on where our true happiness and hope are found, under the theme: **Jesus is the Joy of Christmas.**

Our sermon text records Jesus himself speaking through the prophet Isaiah's pen some 700 years before He was born – telling us about His mission as the Christ. He says:

*<sup>1</sup> The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me. . .*

“Anointing” was the Hebrew custom of installing someone into the office of prophet, priest, or king. A special oil was poured upon a person - symbolizing how the LORD pours out his Spirit upon his chosen servants to give them every gift necessary to fulfill their office. Every anointing in the Old Testament reminded the Israelites that God would send the Messiah or Christ (terms that both mean “the anointed one”). He would be our perfect prophet, priest, and king.

Jesus, the Son of God and the Virgin Mary, is the promised Messiah. He was secretly anointed with the Holy Spirit at His conception and publicly at His baptism. He is your perfect prophet who reveals God to you. He is your perfect priest who offered the only sacrifice that atoned for your sins. He is your perfect King, who not only saved you from sin, death, and the devil's power but promises to rule over all things for your good.

Jesus says: *the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the afflicted. He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for those who are bound.*

Oh, how wonderful these words are to our ears, for who of us isn't afflicted? The devil, the world, and our sinful nature are constantly tempting us to sin and making us feel completely unforgivable when we fall. God's law is clear: he demands perfect obedience. But who of us can claim that? We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.<sup>i</sup>

The realization of our sinfulness should break our hearts. We are slaves to sin: the good we want to do we fail to do, rather the evil we do not want to do, this we find ourselves doing. This saddens us and should make us want to cry out with the apostle Paul, “What a miserable wretch I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”<sup>iii</sup>

Dear Christian, I hope you realize these things about yourself. If not, then you have lost your need for the “Christ” of Christmas. God's law is crystal clear: your sins have separated you from God. If this fact does not terrify you, then you will not be able to understand the true meaning of Christmas. You will not be able to find real joy in who Jesus is and why his birth is so important.

But for all of us who are afflicted and brokenhearted over our sins, Jesus has some incredible comfort: *the LORD has anointed me to preach good news.* What is the good news that Jesus was born to preach? That He has reconciled you to God. Jesus came into this world, born under the law, to keep the law perfectly for you.<sup>iii</sup> He was tempted in every way as you are but was without sin.<sup>iv</sup> Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus won for you the righteousness you need to be justified before God. And He freely offers this righteousness to you through faith in him.<sup>v</sup>

And this news gives you great joy. It binds up your broken heart. Why? Because, through faith in Jesus, you are at peace with God. You do not have to be afraid of His wrath any longer. God loves you. He forgives you. He hears your cries and saves you. He promises to wipe every tear from your eyes.<sup>vi</sup>

Yes, through the Gospel, the LORD has freed you from your captivity to sin and bondage to the devil. He no longer holds any power over you. The prison doors have been opened, and you are free – free to love God as his dearly loved child. You are free to say no to temptation. You are free to love your fellow human as Christ loved you. You are free from the everlasting consequences your sins have earned.

Jesus was sent <sup>2</sup> *to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance for our God, to comfort all who mourn.*

When you consider all that is happening in this world (greed, hardship, perversity, abuse, crime, terror, war, etc.), don't you mourn? Don't you pray in your heart, "O come, O Come, Immanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lowly exile here"?

And that is the beautiful thing about Christmas. Jesus' birth ushered in a new era that will find its culmination on the Last Day. The angels sang about it to the Shepherds: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward mankind."*<sup>vii</sup> The LORD offers all people peace and the forgiveness of sins - regardless of who they are or what they have done. And how do you receive the benefit of this goodwill? Through repentance and faith in Jesus. Yes, in sending Jesus into the world, the Lord not only ushered in a new era of favour and forgiveness. He sent His Son to be your avenger.

Some of you might be familiar with Marvel's "Avengers" movies. If you aren't, they are basically about a group of superheroes that save humanity by beating up its enemies.

Jesus was born the ultimate avenger. He came to crush the head of Satan, destroy the power of sin, and claim victory over death. Jesus' resurrection proves that he accomplished these things in full. On the last day, he will fully exact his vengeance on all enemies of the Gospel. He will open every grave – granting everlasting life to all who believe in him. He will cast Satan and his allies into the lake of endless fire. Never again will they be able to afflict God's people with any sin, pain, or suffering.

Instead, Jesus will *provide for those who mourn in Zion to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, a cloak of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

In the ancient world, sitting in ashes was a sign of deep sorrow and despair. We think of Job, who sat in ashes when He lost everything he had – his riches, family and even his health. But despite all He suffered, He still had Jesus and cried out in confidence: *I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.* <sup>26</sup> *And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God;* <sup>27</sup> *I myself will see him with my own eyes--I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*<sup>viii</sup>

Even though there is much that causes you pain, sorrow, and depression in this life, you nevertheless have Jesus. And having him, you have everything. At the end of time, he will usher you to his side and wipe every tear from your eyes. He will take away all that hurts, all that causes sorrow, and give you joy beyond all gladness. Yes, He will even resurrect your body to live with Him in the perfect paradise He is now preparing for you. And how this truth cheers you in even the worst of times! It offers you a joy that sustains you in every sorrow. It lifts your spirits and gives you the strength to face the evils of each day with fresh confidence. You do not have to be afraid of anything. Why not? Because of the hope you have in Christ.

Our text states that all who hold on to Jesus in faith *will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD to display his beauty.*

Your faith is God's Work – not your own. He planted the Gospel in your hearts, and it took root. You become like a mighty oak that drinks in the water of life by meditating on His Word day and night.<sup>ix</sup> And as you meditate on the Word, looking for and finding Christ on every page of Scripture, your faith and joy in Him increases. You become fruitful: full of spiritual life. The LORD displays his beauty

through you as you witness the Gospel with your lips and, through your actions, show others the same forgiving kindness Jesus has shown you.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you feel down this Christmas? Is a cloud of depression and stress keeping you from being happy? Are you wondering why the holidays' physical sights, sounds, smells, and flavours aren't giving you the same joy as in years past? Turn from those things to focus on Jesus and what he was born to do. He is the true joy of Christmas that no seasonal affective disorder can take away. Meditate on Him in repentance and faith. By doing this, not only will your Christmas be merry, but your hope will endure forever. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. Romans 3:23

<sup>ii</sup> Cf Romans 7:14-25

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Galatians 4:4-5

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Hebrews 4:15

<sup>v</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20-21

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Revelation 21:4

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 2:14 EHV

<sup>viii</sup> Job 19:25-27 NIV

<sup>ix</sup> Cf. Psalm 1:1-3