

Third Sunday in Advent
Oh Come Emmanuel: The Gift of Joy
Isaiah 61:1-3,10,11
12/17/17

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Ps 118:24)

Isaiah 61:1-3,10,11

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The day you've been waiting for all Advent has finally come – we lit the pink candle! Ok, so maybe that wasn't such a big deal to you. But it is kind of odd that one of the candles in the Advent wreath is a different color than the others, isn't it? The pink candle is a hold-over from when purple was the main color for Advent. Purple is the color of sorrow and repentance (a fact of which I often remind my Viking fan mother...). The thinking of having purple for Advent came from the words of John the Baptist, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near"** (Matthew 3:2). Sin is the biggest obstacle to our being prepared for Jesus' coming again, so the purple was to remind us to clear out sin.

But the Third Sunday in Advent always has a rejoicing theme, you see that again today, right? *"Jesus is the Light, therefore, Rejoice!"* So, it didn't really work to have a purple candle. For that reason, Advent wreaths have always used a pink candle – the color of joy – for this third Sunday in Advent. When the usual color for Advent changed to blue – the color of hope, a change made because that is really the theme of Advent, waiting with hope for Jesus to come – the pink candle remained.

It's a bit ridiculous, isn't it, that we need a specially-colored candle to remind us to be filled with joy when preparing to celebrate Jesus' first coming at Christmas, and when we look forward to his second coming on Judgment Day?

But we do so often need that reminder because our joy gets overshadowed by worry, our joy gets drowned out by sadness, our joy is robbed by frustration and disappointment. Today, then, through the prophet Isaiah, God gives you the gift of joy.

What is it that gives you the greatest joy this time of year? Finding the perfect gift? Christmas decorations? Christmas lights? Family gatherings? At the same time, what is it that robs you of joy this time of year? Dealing with the crowds while shopping for the perfect gift? Waiting in the endlessly long line at the post office to pick up the gifts you've ordered online? Trying to remember where you stored the Christmas decorations only to find that half the lights don't work when they finally are found? Not being able to get together with family because of distance and schedules? So, sometimes, the things we hope will bring the greatest joy end up being the cause of the greatest frustrations. Maybe that's because we are focusing on the wrong thing for our real source of joy.

The people at Jesus' day had the same problem. They heard God's promises of a Savior, and, looking around them, they saw so much that they could use a Savior to fix. Their country had been overrun by so many powerful nations in the past, they could use a Savior to set up a kingdom like the great King David did. The Romans were in control at the time. They could use a Savior to drive them out and restore their country.

They heard John point to Jesus as the Savior, but he didn't act like what they wanted a Savior to do. Sure, he was a great teacher, but the Savior...they weren't so sure. Once, when Jesus was teaching in the synagogue of Nazareth, he was handed the scroll of Isaiah and read the passage that is the sermon text today. After he finished, he rolled up the scroll, and simply said, **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"** (Luke 4:21). It was a dramatic moment, Jesus claimed for himself the title of Savior. It was a dramatic moment, followed by the crowd becoming so furious they wanted to throw Jesus off a cliff!

He didn't fit what they wanted in a Savior, so they rejected him. Most today want Jesus to be nothing more than a good example – WWJD, remember those bracelets. Most want Jesus to be nothing more than one who fights for the oppressed – the original social justice warrior.

But a Savior from sin...that would imply there's a problem with me. That would imply that I need saving. Few want to admit that. So the real Jesus is rejected or exchanged for a fake imitation of their own making. The Apostle John wrote this about the reception Jesus received, **"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him"** (John 1:10,11).

And don't think you are any better. You would have rejected him too, if not for God's gracious work in your heart. You were just as blind, just as dead in sin as everyone else who has ever lived. Paul reminds us of that very fact, **"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live...Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath...you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world"** (Ephesians 2:1-3, 12).

Along with every other person who has ever lived you were locked in constant rebellion against God. You see that rebellion in yourselves, when you rebel against God's will by following the sinful desires of your heart. You lie, cheat, grumble, complain, lust and so much more. The sin that we have inherited and the sins that we commit make us unfit to stand before God. They separate us from him and leave us deserving of his punishment.

But in his great love God was not willing to see you punished for all eternity in hell. Because you were unable to save yourself God planned his great exchange to send you a Savior, the only Savior who could win your forgiveness. Jesus is that Savior.

In Galatians, God tells us that throughout the history of the world God arranged everything so that the time was just right for your Savior substitute to come into the world. **"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons"** (Galatians 4:4,5). God sent his Son, his one and only Son to take your place. Our sins, and our need to be saved from our sins, caused Jesus to come down, to leave the glory of heaven, to live among us here on this world. At Christmas, the eternal God took on human flesh, was born of a woman so that he might rescue you. In order to make God's planned exchange work, Jesus lived on this earth, fulfilling God's demands. He was perfect in everything he did. He did not ever lie, cheat, grumble, complain, lust or anything else that so often fills our lives. He was perfectly without sin.

Earlier in Isaiah, God tells us the other part of the exchange that he made for you. **"But he [Jesus] was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us**

peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4,5). The exchange that God made for you is wonderful beyond belief. That Jesus would willingly take up your sins and suffer the pain and torment of hell in your place is unbelievable love. But that is what it cost to save you. That is the only payment that would be acceptable to God. Our sins demanded the punishment of death. Jesus willing gave his life on the cross to win the forgiveness that you needed.

And God has proclaimed that good news to you so that you might have joy, real and lasting, perfect joy. **“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”**. God has proclaimed that good news to you. He tells you that you are no longer poor, but rich with his love and forgiveness. He binds up your brokenness with the assurance of his love and care. He gives you freedom from sin, freedom from the law, freedom from worry that you don’t measure up, freedom from fear.

By now bringing you to faith in Jesus, by calling you out of the darkness of sin, God has made Jesus’ payment your own. He has credited the perfection of Jesus to your account and washed away your sins in his blood. Look at how Isaiah, in the sermon text, describes with vivid language what God’s Christmas Exchange has done for you. He has taken away everything that you deserved from him, eternal punishment of hell, and replaced it with joy and gladness. Isaiah says, Jesus came **“to bestow on them [on you] 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.”**

This exchange that God made, giving his Son to become sin for us so that we might have life with him is the greatest gift we could have received. And God set that plan into motion at Christmas. As we draw closer to the manger this Christmas season, recognize with joy-filled wonder just what we see in the manger. He is more than just a baby. He is more than just a great man who teaches us to be great. He is the Savior you needed.

Isaiah gives us the result of the joy of forgiveness God gives at Christmas, **“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”**. And that joy no one can take from you. No matter how your plans to celebrate Christmas turn out, no matter if you were able to get the best gift or if it was sold out, no matter if you never even had time to get the decorations out this year, no matter if you aren’t able to get together with family – no one can take away the joy of Christmas, the joy of a Savior.

Amen

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom 15:13)

Amen