

Third Sunday in Advent

December 17, 2017

Isaiah 61:1-3, 10, 11

We are Closer to the Year of the Lord's Favor.

Rev. George Ferch

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

We can say, "Merry Christmas," once again. Friends on FB are asking the urgent question, "Are you keeping Christ in Christmas?" These kinds of statements and questions are indicative of the worry many Christians have over the so-called war on Christmas. We need to remember Christ is in Christmas as a matter of fact.

Not to worry, Christmas is in our hearts. In spite of all the ranting and raving against our celebration of Christ's birth, the psalmist's questions in Psalm 2 remain, "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?" Nothing has changed since the magi told Herod about the birth of a new king and he became disturbed. Christ always has been in Christmas. He always will be. No one can rob us of that joy.

Advent 3 changes the mood from repentance to joy. In the midst of our sorrow over our sin comes joy as our celebration draws closer. In the historical liturgy, today is Gaudate, Latin for 'Rejoice. The rose or pink Advent candle represents that joy.

The Savior's words through Isaiah ring out the reason for our joy. **We are Closer to the Year of our Lord's Favor.** Closer to the greatest good news from God. Closer to the One who fulfills the greatest need of sinners.

In the previous chapter, Isaiah portrayed the glory of the New Testament era in detail. Messiah's day would be a day of glory for Zion. He would be the light that shines on the Gentiles. Now the speaker changes. The coming Messiah speaks through the prophet. He prophesies the day of his coming "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The greatest good news from God is the Year of Jubilee. Every fifty years in Israel there was a year of jubilee. People forgave the debts of their debtors. People could redeem lost property. There was freedom for captives and release for prisoners.

This Year of Jubilee also was a picture of the coming freedom and joy the Messiah would bring. He would bring good news, the gospel, to the poor in spirit. He would bind up the hearts guilt had broken. He would free sinners from the captivity of our sin, death and hell. The Messiah was born in Bethlehem so he could grow up and offer up his holy life into death on the cross to accomplish these promises. There is joy today as we stand closer to the year of the Lord's favor in that greatest good news from God.

Jesus left no doubt about whom was speaking in Isaiah 61. Shortly after his baptism, Jesus read Isaiah's words in the synagogue at Nazareth and applied them to himself. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus is the Messiah. God the Father had anointed his Son with the Holy Spirit and with power at Jesus' baptism. Now Jesus began to preach and teach. He began to do miracles. Our Savior demonstrated in word and deed that the Spirit of the Lord was on him because his Father had anointed him. The title Messiah, Christ in Greek, means "the Anointed One."

The Savior declares the blessings of his work in five different ways. To those in spiritual poverty, who say we have nothing to offer God toward our righteousness and salvation, the Anointed One proclaimed the good news that the Father has credited his Son's perfect righteousness to them. To the wounds the guilt of sin has inflicted on sinful hearts, the Anointed One applied the healing balm of free forgiveness. To those held captive by the chains of sin and the fear of death, the Anointed One brought freedom and

release by the power of his resurrection from the dead. The final one can be translated “release from darkness for the blind.” Those who could not see their Savior can now see him by the Spirit’s enlightenment.

We are closer to the celebration of our Savior’s birth. Jesus is the greatest good news from God. He is our joy.

Jesus is the One who fulfills the greatest need of sinners.

The Anointed One also speaks about three exchanges. These give us an additional picture of Jesus’ work for our temporal and eternal joy; “a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.”

All of these describe the beauty of the bridegroom and bride. They come “clothed with the garments of salvation and arrayed in the robe of his righteousness.” Jesus has changed us from mourners dressed in the garments of sorrow, to newlyweds clothed in joy. Jesus has turned our funerals on account of sin into wedding feasts at the start of a new life with Christ. These changes in our status before the Lord lead to our delighting greatly in the LORD and our souls rejoicing in God.

Our Savior’s birth means the coming of that transformation. The Son of God spoke these prophecies first through Isaiah as though they already had come to pass. Then, he came into the world as a human being and grew up to proclaim them again with full right and authority as Jesus of Nazareth. He has come to us, those so desperately in need, and delivered his blessings through the Holy Spirit. He has changed us from weak saplings into something new and strong.

The Messiah also used the picture of plantings and trees. “They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.” He makes that happen “as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seed to grow.”

In all our new beauty and strength we display the LORD’s splendor. The LORD’s splendor elicits our righteousness and praise. The glory is not ours but Christ’s. The LORD’s splendor is his carrying out the year of the LORD’s favor with good news, freedom, and joy. As our Christmas celebration draws near, we are closer to the One who fulfills the greatest need of sinners. That greatest need is our redemption.

The war against Christmas has gone on since Herod ordered the death of the little boys in Bethlehem. This evil king could not get rid of Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One. No attack on externals today can eliminate what Christ has brought to us sinners, our greatest need; his righteousness for our unrighteousness, his freedom for our captivity, his joy for our sorrow.

Put Christ back into Christmas? This is not necessary. He never left. He never will. Nor then, is there reason to answer the question, “Are you keeping Christ in Christmas?” A better question to answer is, “Are you keeping yourself in Christmas, the bringing of the year of the LORD’s favor?” Amen. <SDG>