

Isaiah 61:1-3,10-11 + The King Comes to Give You Gifts of Joy
Series: Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY
3rd Sunday of Advent + 17 December 2017

You walk into Wal-Mart and it's one of the first things you see—the number. How many shopping days are left until Christmas? As of today, it's eight. In my family, "Christmas" has always been Christmas Eve, so for us and others like us, that number is down to seven. Do you adults (and maybe some of you teens) feel some tension, some nerves when you hear that we're only a week away from Christmas? Perhaps you've had a busy fall followed by a busier Advent combined with a mix of procrastination, bad weather, and a little poor timing...and you find yourself still needing to finish your Christmas shopping. Are you one of those folks who will be leaving church quickly next Sunday morning to wrap up your last minute gift shopping? Wouldn't it be nice if someone just took care of all that for you?

Now if you're a kid, maybe it's a different kind of tension—not stress or nerves or worry, but the tension of building excitement and anticipation. Only 8 more days (or 7) until you get to tear into those neatly wrapped gifts that your parents or grandparents have waiting for you under the Christmas tree! You've made your wish lists. You've dropped hints to your parents. You've even wondered if you should talk to Santa the next time you're at the mall, but you don't know what you're going to receive and time is running out. Your excitement and anticipation and uncertainty are all building. Wouldn't it be nice to get all your gifts right now, so you can open and enjoy them?

Friends, you can understand why the days and weeks leading up to Christmas can be so exhausting. Presents are cool and can be lots of fun when you receive them, but overeager expectations and sky high hopes can all come crashing down if you don't get what you want. Of course, there's the whole matter of how long the excitement lasts before you get bored or something breaks and you move on. Shopping for your loved ones can be enjoyable, even fun as you search for something special, that is, unless you're under the gun as time runs short and your to-do list takes on ginormous length. It's no surprise, then, when Christmas Day rolls around and everyone's glad to be done with it.

Yet on this Advent morning with the beginning of our Christmas celebrations only a mere 7 days away, the Lord wants you to set it all aside—the to-do list, the stress, the wish lists, the shopping, and yes, even the gifts. He wants you to stop for a moment and listen closely, because he's about to give you some very special gifts. You could even say they're Advent gifts, but you don't get them because you've been good or extra nice or you've avoided being bad. In fact, what you've done or failed to do has no bearing whatsoever on him giving you these gifts. They don't come from a jolly old elf. They don't come from loved ones. No, they come from the nail-pierced hands of a gracious king, and **THE KING COMES TO GIVE YOU GIFTS OF JOY.**

Last week, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah brought out exhibits demonstrating how our God has kept every promise to us through our Savior Jesus. Today the prophet brings out gifts from our God. When you tear off the wrapping paper and open the box of the first gift, you find inside a well-worn Bible, a roll of bandages, a certificate of pardon signed with the scarlet signature of the King, and a note explaining this Advent gift from Christ himself. ***"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, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God..."***

When the Lord first inspired Isaiah to write these words 700 years before the birth of Christ, things were not looking good for Israel. For so long, they had rejected the Lord and his warnings, but eventually God's judgment came to much of Israel. It wouldn't be long before that destruction would come crashing down on what was left. Gaping holes would ruin Jerusalem's walls. The glorious temple of the Lord would be reduced to a pile of burned-out rubble. The Jews would be forced into a 70-year exile 1,000 miles away from home in Babylon before they could return—and the land would still be ruled by others. A time was coming, though, when the Lord would deliver his people, but it would be deliverance of a different kind. The Messiah, the Christ, God's "Anointed One" would come to proclaim **"good news"** of freedom and deliverance to God's people and healing for the brokenhearted.

So why are we getting this gift? Isn't this a gift that should've been given to the ancient Jews of Isaiah's time or after the exile? Yes, they needed it, but so do we. You see, in so many ways, things don't look good for us either. Every one of us is spiritually **"poor"** before God. Not a single one of us has anything to offer, except the filthy, tattered rags of our personal sins. By nature, we're all "beggars" who need the **"good news"** of Christ that we

have on the well-worn pages of Scripture, **“good news”** that God has made us rich in Jesus because Christ set aside his glory and made himself poor for us.

What about the bandages? Jesus comes to **“bind up the brokenhearted.”** **“Brokenhearted”** has this idea of having a heart or conscience that is so broken up that it gives you no rest. We’ve all been there. Sometimes you try to hide or ignore the seriousness of your sin, but even if you think you’re successful, the memory of what you’ve done or failed to do lives on. What’s worse is if you find yourself falling back into that sin far too easily. Guilt and shame crush and break your heart, but Christ has come to bandage your broken heart with the soothing, healing balm of his forgiveness for you.

...But what about the letter of pardon? The signature is not the black ink cursive of a president or governor pardoning a death row inmate. Instead it’s the scarlet-red signature of the King of kings. What is it that holds you captive? Greed? Lust? Anger? Envy? Arrogance? Selfishness? Insecurity? Whatever enslaves you will never willingly let you go. Guilt can plunge you so far into the darkest depths of despair that you can’t see a way out. If you look to God’s Law about being good and not doing evil, you won’t find freedom there. Instead, that holy Law fills you with terror, because you find yourself deserving God’s punishment for your sins. Every sin brings you closer to cashing in that lifelong sentence of death. You can’t get yourself out, but the King can.

You see, the King became a criminal in your place. The King faced your condemnation in your place. The King suffered a criminal’s death on a cross to set you free, to burst the chains of your guilt and open the prison door of your death. He poured light into the darkness of your despair. You don’t have to be a slave to sin or Satan or death anymore. No, you have freedom in Christ. That means he canceled your debt of sin. Now you, who once sat on death row waiting for God’s eternal damnation, have heard your Savior declare you “not guilty!”, and now you enjoy God’s favor and mercy, even as we await his coming judgment.

That was a pretty amazing gift, but the prophet has another one for you. When you tear off the wrapping paper and open the box, you find inside a beautiful crown, a bottle of fragrant olive oil, and some very fine clothing. You also find a note explaining this Advent gift from the Lord. **“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me... to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them 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.”**

In Isaiah’s time, when a person mourned the loss of another, they put on rough clothing called sackcloth and poured black ashes on their head to symbolize their mourning, but when it was a time for joy and gladness, they rubbed fragrant oil on their skin and wore their best clothes. The sad condition of our sins left us in mourning, but the King has come and replaced our mourning with joy. Jesus clothed us with garments of his salvation and his righteousness. No more sackcloth and ashes for us. No more sorrow or mourning over sin. Now we have joy, celebration, and gladness in Christ. He has replaced our despair over sin with peace and comfort for our souls.

That leads to our third and final gift. Isaiah takes it from the King’s nail-pierced hands and places it in front of us. When you tear off the wrapping paper and open the box, you find inside wedding garments, a bride’s jewels, and a small potted plant. You also find a note explaining this Advent gift from the Lord, but this gift is different, because this gift symbolizes our response to the King’s gifts. **“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, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.”**

Isaiah paints a beautiful picture of our joy in Christ as believers. Think of a bride and groom. Their joy is expressed in the way they dress. The bride wears a flowing, white dress, perhaps with a necklace of beautiful jewels around her neck and her hair beautifully done up. The groom is dressed in his finest. Quite possibly at no other time will they look this beautiful.

In Christ, our joy is even greater than theirs—and it’s every day, but why do we rejoice? To use the words of the prophet, Christ has clothed us with salvation and righteousness. He rescued us from certain doom. He is the sole reason we are declared not guilty in God’s court. He rescues us, he justifies us purely because of his undeserved, jaw-droppingly gorgeous grace evident in a Bethlehem stable and a Nazareth home, on a Galilean seashore and a criminal’s cross, and in an empty tomb. Eternity isn’t long enough for us to finish rejoicing in what Christ Jesus has done for us.

So how will this joy be yours as Advent ends and Christmas begins? Without Jesus, our sins leave us disgusting beyond belief, but Christ has cleansed us with his holy, precious blood. So now you can display his splendor as righteousness and praise spring up like new plants in your Advent preparations, as you work through your to-do lists and prepare for all of your Christmas celebrations. We can rejoice because our King has come to proclaim peace to our sorry souls, to cover us with his righteousness, and to give us joy that will last long after this Christmas and goes. Dear friends, in Christ our King find joy this Advent! Amen.