Advent Midweek 3

Waiting with Joy

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Sermon Outline

 3. The world misses the true joy of Christmas because it rejects Jesus as the Christ of Christmas.

 2. But as the Christ, Jesus brings joy at Christmas because he brings the year of the Lord’s favor.

 1. Therefore, we do rejoice, for Christmas brings on the wedding feast for Christ’s Bride, the Church.

Our Joy at This Merry Christmas Is in Jesus, Who Is the Christ.

Sermon

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God. . . . I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteous­ness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (1–2, 10)

Merry Christmas! Christmas is only a week and a half away, but you can already sense the joyous anticipation building. In spite of the secularization of American culture, there is something about Christmas that remains deeply embedded in the national consciousness—something that defines us and life itself, because it involves that which is true and beautiful, that which is eternal, holy, and divine. It is difficult to imagine America without Christmas.

 This may partly explain the visceral reaction to political correctness and the removal of crèches from town squares and any reference to Christmas in our schools. Anti-Christian advocates, combined with pluralistic sensitivity and tolerance for non-Christian religions, attempt to remove “Christmas” from our public discourse and replace it with “Happy Holidays,” leaving many Christians distressed if not downright livid.

Merry Christmas! We say “merry” because it is a joyous time for Christians. The merriness is not simply eggnog-enhanced mirth amid family, friends, festive food, and gifts. The “merry” in “Merry Christmas” is more like the “*feliz*” in “*feliz Navidad*,” which is translated “joyous nativity.” It reflects the inexplicable felicity following a long pregnancy as mother and father hold their infant for the first time.

Words cannot express the joy and wonder when one comes face-to-face with the mystery of life at the birth of a child. Christmas is about the nativity of Christ, for whose birth Mary and Joseph waited nine months and for whose birth God’s people Israel had waited for centuries. “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate Deity! Pleased as Man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel!” (*LSB* 380:2).

3.

It should not surprise us that the world, including our society, does not embrace Christmas for what it really is. Christmas is about Jesus Christ. No one can wake up Christmas morning and avoid the questions Jesus posed to Peter: “Who do the crowds say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” Peter correctly answered, “The Christ of God.” What does it mean to be the Christ? Jesus went on to explain to Peter and his disciples, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected . . . killed, and on the third day be raised” (Lk 9:18, 20, 22).

But why did Peter refer to Jesus as “the Christ”? What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ? To answer this question is to answer the question “What is Christmas?” Jesus is the human name given him at his birth by Joseph—given at the instructions of the Lord himself through the angel, who appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). The name *Jesus* comes from the Hebrew word *Joshua,* which means “Yahweh saves,” that is, “The Lord saves.”

The word *Christ*, on the other hand, is a title that comes from the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which means “anointed by Yahweh/the Lord.” Thus when the angel of the Lord told the shepherds, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11), he was simply saying, “The Anointed One” is born to you this day. This was the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One who had been promised to Adam and Eve after the fall into sin and promised to Abraham and David and to God’s Old Testament Church through his prophets. Amazingly, we hear the Christ, the Anointed One, himself speaking in the opening verses of Isaiah 61.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor;

he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,

and the day of vengeance of our God;

to comfort all who mourn. (vv 1–2)

If there is any question as to whether these verses are referring to Jesus, our Lord himself made it unmistakably clear at the beginning of his ministry when he preached in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. Imagine Jesus standing in front of the congregation, reading from a scroll on which were written these words from Is 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor

 . . . liberty to the captives

 . . . to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Lk 4:18–19)

Then Luke records, “[Jesus] rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (Lk 4:20–21). And what was the reaction of the people in the synagogue? They drove Jesus out of town and would have thrown him off a cliff to his death if they had had their way with him. This sad rejection of Christ was not the first nor the last time the Lord’s Anointed would be rejected.

Jesus’ work of salvation ended on the cross, when the people and religious leaders killed the Savior of the world. The apostle John tells us, “Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light” (Jn 3:19).

People will tolerate and even embrace a secularized “Christmas” holiday—a winter festival with lights, parties, food, presents, and even decorated trees. Some may even tolerate a generic, secularized baby Jesus making a brief appearance, but he will not be the promised Anointed One revealed in the Old and New Testaments. He must not be the Christ whom the apostle Paul says “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age” (Gal 1:4).

There is an intriguing phenomenon occurring all over the world these days. One can go almost anywhere in December and find Christmas decorations—though in many respects they are commercially driven and secularized. Colored lights and “Christmas” trees decked in gold can be found in shopping malls in rich Arab nations and in traditionally Hindu, Buddhist, and Shinto nations such as India, China, and Japan.

It was not too long ago that the Soviet Union in its atheistic hatred of all religion forbade the celebration of Christmas and retained the ban on the public display of Christmas and New Year’s trees as evidence of “bourgeois and religious prejudice.” Nevertheless, by 1935, New Year’s trees began appearing in schools, in Young Pioneer Palaces, and in children’s homes, clubs, theaters, and cinemas. The story is told about one Soviet leader who predicted that after May 1, 1937, the name of God would be forgotten.

Ironically, the name of this leader has been forgotten, but the name of God remains, as do Christmas trees.

2.

Ultimately, the cultural war currently waging in America and around the world comes down to the question “Who do men say that I am?” “What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping?” (*LSB* 370:1). The answer to this question is given by the Messiah himself. It is Jesus Christ himself, the eternally begotten Son, who is speaking to the Old Testament Church in Is 61:1—the same Jesus who preached to his home congregation in Nazareth. Our Lord announces, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord had anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (v 1).

Prophets, priests, and kings were anointed when placed into office. To be anointed was to be given the power and authority to carry out the task. It is akin to kings being crowned, presidents being inaugurated, and pastors being ordained. Jesus was not placed into the office of the Savior of the world by men, but was sent and anointed by the Lord God himself. St. John tells us, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son” (3:16). He who created the world by the power of his Word sent his eternally begotten divine Son in the flesh to take on creation itself, that he might atone for the sins of the world and restore the fallen creation by offering up his holy and divine flesh on the cross.

Ah, Lord, though You created all,

How weak You are, so poor and small,

That You should choose to lay Your head

Where lowly cattle lately fed! (*LSB* 358:9)

The same Anointed One whom St. John calls “the Word” through whom all things were made (Jn 1:1, 3) was anointed by the Spirit for a work that involved his divine yet human lips and tongue. Note the verbs in our text from Isaiah. Jesus says the Spirit has anointed me “to bring good news,” “to proclaim liberty to the captives,” and “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God” (vv 1–2).

Jesus was anointed with the Spirit to preach the Word—the Word of God’s favor, or grace, and the Word of vengeance and judgment. There is a lot of Law and judgment preached in the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament. But here in Is 61, the focus is on the fact that the Anointed One is being sent to preach the Gospel, the Good News, to the poor. To bind up the brokenhearted. To proclaim freedom from captivity of sin and death, and to comfort those who mourn over the wages of sin.

In one sense, the “year of the Lord’s favor” refers to the first advent of Christ, when he came to bring salvation through his atoning life and death. The “day of vengeance” refers to the Last Day, when our Lord will return to judge the living and the dead.

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17). But those who reject the salvation he offers will face an eternal judgment where, as Jesus himself said, “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 8:12).

Until “Happy Holiday” became a lame attempt to take Christ out of Christmas, it was certainly an acceptable greeting. To say “Happy Holiday” is to say “Happy Holy Day.” Christmas Day is holy because it is the day the holy, eternal, only-begotten Son of the Father became flesh and dwelt among us in grace and truth. It is the birth of the holy and sinless Lamb of God, who came to give his life for the sins of the world.

Our season’s greetings are happy and merry because we are confessing what Isaiah and Jesus proclaimed, namely, that we are living in the “year of the Lord’s favor.” That is why our calendars still reflect these days as *anno Domini*, “the year of our Lord 2011.” These are the days and years that he proclaims to us the Good News and binds up our sick and wounded hearts and frees us from the depressing captivity and darkness of sin and death. We are living in “the year of the Lord’s favor” because we have been baptized into Jesus, the Christ. When we were baptized, we were released from captivity and clothed with his robe of righteousness.

In his explanation of Holy Baptism to the Colossians, the apostle Paul writes, “He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13–14). One can easily picture a wretched prisoner emerging from the darkness and stench of a dungeon after years of hopelessness and utter despair. His ragged and smelly clothes are removed. He is washed, covered with sweet-smelling and soothing oil, and then dressed in the finest apparel—the kind worn at a wedding celebration.

1.

What was said about Jesus in Is 61:10 is now said about us: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” Thus St. Paul tells us, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27).

Isaiah used the imagery of a wedding feast to express the intimate and joyous relationship that the Messiah will bring about between God and his people. This has been fulfilled with the coming of Christ and the creation of his Bride, the Church, whom Christ himself has sanctified, “having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle . . . holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:26–27).

The Church is none other than the Messiah’s holy Bride and our worship is a joyous wedding celebration that, like Christmas, includes good food, beautiful decorations, and glorious music all wrapped in joy and gladness. A pastor tells the story of visiting a woman who refused to come to worship. “Oh, I love Jesus,” she insisted, “it’s just those people in church that I can’t stand.” The pastor thoughtfully replied, “Well, that’s sort of like telling Jesus, ‘I love you. I just don’t like your ugly Bride.’ ”

Granted, the Church retains the dual nature of being washed and cleansed saint, yet sinner. But in our Lord’s eyes, the eyes of the Bridegroom, the eyes of the One who really matters, she is beautiful, holy, and blameless. Thus, even now, she joyfully sings the heavenly wedding song recorded by St. John:

Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God

the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult

and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,

and his Bride has made herself ready;

it was granted her to clothe herself

with fine linen, bright and pure. (Rev 19:6–8)

He who was conceived by the Holy Spirit was also anointed by the Spirit to preach the Word and give his perfect life as a ransom for all. He who was anointed by the Spirit gives the same Spirit to his apostles and pastors in order to absolve sins and to make disciples through teaching and Holy Baptism, where the same Holy Spirit cleansed you from all your sins and made you a member of His holy and beautiful Bride—his Church. In place of the sin and despair, captivity and desolation brought upon by Adam’s tragic fall in the Garden of Eden, the Anointed One’s life and Word restores creation, and a new garden sprouts forth to bloom and grow the world over.

For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,

and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,

so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise

to sprout up before all the nations. (v 11)

And that is exactly what will happen again a week and a half from today, when all over the world faithful Christians gather in joy to praise the Savior of the world.

Our Joy at This Merry Christmas
Is in Jesus, Who Is the Christ.

So, in the words of the popular Spanish song “*Feliz Navidad”: Feliz Navidad* . . . [I want to wish you joyous nativity and a merry Christmas,] from the bottom of my heart.”