

"The Joy of Advent"
Based on Is. 61:1-2
Preached on Dec. 13, 2020

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Pink. Yep, pink. For those of you not familiar with the church calendar, today is traditionally known as "Gaudete Sunday." Gaudete is just the Latin word for "rejoice." This is the day we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath, reminding us that today is a little bit different from the rest of Advent. You see, up until this point the emphasis has been on the penitential nature of Advent. The "turn from your sin, prepare your heart for the king" nature of Advent. Which is important because we often forget that Advent, just like Lent, is a time of repentance. Jesus is the reason for the season, but we often forget why Jesus came to us—not to simply be a cute little baby in a manger, but to offer that soft flesh as payment for our sin. Yet, this is also why we take a little timeout in the midst of this penitential season to remember the joy of our salvation; the joy of God's grace, which is ours because of this coming Christ alone.

But what exactly do we celebrate and rejoice over today? Do we rejoice over something that happened almost two-thousand years ago? I will admit: I find it difficult to be excited about something that happened long before I was around. It's hard to get excited about stuff that happened one year ago, let alone two thousand years ago. What exactly are we to rejoice over today?

The answer is found in Scripture, and it's amazingly simple and clear. We rejoice today, because of the reality of salvation today. Not someone else's reality or story. Not from some other space or time. Ours. Now. God is announcing anew this very moment that He has nothing but grace for you in Christ, something you receive only by faith. Christ secured it long ago, certainly - but He is declaring it to you now. Today. As you hear it. And this is reason for great joy. Gaudete. Rejoice.

Think about it. When did Jesus come to earth? It may seem like a trick question, but it's not, and that's the problem. You see, Jesus didn't just advent with mankind two thousand years ago in a little stable in some backwoods little village on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. Certainly, He came to us at that time to be born of flesh, bone, and blood, all so that He could take that same flesh, bone, and blood to the cross for us as an all-redeeming, perfect sacrifice. But those thirty-three years of Jesus' earthly life and ministry are by no means the entire story. Jesus will come again in all His glory. Christmas is also supposed to remind us of this blessed news. You and I both know that not too many people think of Judgment Day and the resurrection when "Away in a Manger" is played. Why not? Christ will come again, in all His glory. All will see and know and behold Christ the Lord. Christmas should remind us of this blessed event.

Ah, but...there's still more to the story. What about between the manger and the Judgment? I'm not excited for the past, and I'm not excited for the future. You need to tell me about life now. What about right now? Does God leave us to fend for ourselves? Absolutely not! Salvation has never, is never, and will never be about what we can do for ourselves. Salvation has always and will always be about what Christ does for us. And this is precisely where God's Word for this morning confronts the well-intentioned, yet unhelpful teaching that Christ is just a thing of the past, or a thing of the future.

Consider the words of John the Baptist when the priests and Levites came to him, asking if he was the Christ. We're told that he confessed, that he did not deny, but confessed that he was not the Christ. I want you think about that for a moment, because there's a lot there. John confessed the truth. This was simply a denial. He confessed that he wasn't the Christ, because the Christ stood among them, and John was simply preparing the way for Him, calling people to repentance and forgiveness in baptism. John pointed to Christ and Christ alone for salvation. He didn't point to a manger scene thirty-three years earlier. He opened his mouth and let God do the talking, pointing to the present-tense Christ right in their midst.

Consider also the opening verses of our Old Testament lesson for this morning. "The Lord has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to proclaim release to those who are bound [sight to the blind], to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the single day of His wrath; to comfort all who mourn." Did you catch how many times the concept of announcing takes place in just these two verses? More to the point, did you notice that all of this reversal—from sin to salvation; death to life—is a result of preaching and proclamation?

Nowhere in these verses is there any mention of man having to do his part in order for salvation and deliverance to become reality. There is no mention of man's works anywhere here. The Word is what accomplishes this divine and joyous reversal. In fact, when you look at the context of that entire portion of Scripture, the speaker in these verses is the Messiah Himself, it's not even Isaiah. Think about that! The Word of God is what affected all this change. The Word of God Himself makes it clear that it is the Word that brings about life and salvation and liberty and comfort; the same Word of God who would later become flesh and dwell with man in the midst of sin; the same Word of God made flesh that John confessed and pointed to.

My fellow redeemed: Perk up. This same life-giving Word of God made flesh is actively at work in you by this very Word. Nothing has changed as far as mankind's salvation goes. We still contribute nothing. We still bring nothing to the table. God does it all for us. He declares right now that He is coming to you in this Word to work life and forgiveness and salvation for you.

My fellow redeemed: This is our joy today! This is why we gaudete (rejoice). Christ the Lord, the Word of God made flesh, continues to be faithful and true to His Word, "I am with you always, to the very end of the ages." The reality of Immanuel—God with us—isn't just a past-tense or future-tense thing. Christ the Lord continues to advent with us, presently and actively saving us from our sin, calling us to repentance and comforting us with His Gospel promise that "It is finished." He is actively and presently at work among us, absolving us of our sin and feeding us with His own life-giving body and blood.

Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Behold! The Advent of our King!

To Him alone be glory forever and ever. Amen.