

ISAIAH 61:1-5 & 8-11 AND 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24

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SURELY SHE WAITED IN FEARFUL ANTICIPATION FOR MANY THINGS-FOR THE NEWS TO REACH HER PARENTS, HER FIANCÉ JOSEPH, AND THE COMMUNITY.

SHE ALSO WAITED, AS THE BIBLE TELLS US IN WONDER AND JOY, AS RECORDED IN LUKE 1. THERE WE ARE TOLD SHE PROCLAIMED HER JOY IN THE PRESENCE OF HER COUSIN ELIZABETH.

MARY SAID: "MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD AND MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR."

MARY HAD JOY IN THE LORD HER GOD, AND HER ROLE IN THE FULFILLMENT OF HIS PROMISES.

THUS SHE GAVE US AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO WAIT. THIS CAN BE HELPFUL SINCE, WAITING IS AN INEVITABLE PART OF THIS SEASON, AS ALREADY MENTIONED.

BUT WE, OF COURSE, DO NOT WAIT IN THE SAME WAY MARY DID.

FOR US WAITING TAKES MANY DIFFERENT FORMS. FOR SOME IT CAN BE BORING AND FOR OTHERS STRESSFUL, AND FOR MANY HOPEFUL.

BUT FOR ALL CHRISTIANS THERE CAN ALSO BE JOY IN WAITING, INDEED AS THE APOSTLE PAUL WROTE WE HAVE REASON TO ALWAYS REJOICE.

WHAT HE MEANT IN TODAY'S READING, AND IN HIS OTHER LETTERS, IS THAT CHRISTIANS HAVE JOY IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND WHAT HE HAS DONE FOR US.

JOY, WE NEED TO REMEMBER IS NOT USUALLY AN EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE.

INSTEAD IT CAN BE PRESENT WHEN WE ARE FEELING SAD OR STRESSED AS WELL AS WHEN FEELING HAPPY OR HOPEFUL.

FOR EXAMPLE- HAPPINESS IS WHAT WE FEEL WHEN WE GET THE CHRISTMAS GIFT WE ASKED FOR, OR ARE SURPRISED BY A GIFT WE DELIGHT IN.

HAPPINESS IS ALSO FELT WHEN WE GIVE A GIFT THAT SOME ONE ELSE LOVES. JOY IS DEEPER AND DIFFERENT.

IT IS MORE OF A STATE OF BEING GRATEFUL FOR WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US, AND FOR OUR SALVATION, THAN AN EMOTION.

JOY IS MADE POSSIBLE WHEN JESUS CHRIST IS THE ANCHOR OF OUR LIVES.

I CAME ACROSS A METAPHOR FOR JOY, IN WHICH SOMEONE COMPARED THE CHRISTIAN LIFE TO A BUOY IN THE WATER.

SOMETIMES THE BUOY FLOATS GENTLY ON RIPPLES OR SMALL WAVES, OTHER TIMES IT SEEMS MOTIONLESS IN STILL WATERS.

IT CAN ALSO BE TOSSED AROUND VIOLENTLY IN TURBULENT WATERS, OR ALMOST DISAPPEAR BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE WATER, YET IT ALWAYS POPS UP AGAIN.

IT DOES SO BECAUSE ITS ANCHOR IS STRONG. OUR LIVES ARE NOT SO DIFFERENT, IN SOME WAYS, FROM THAT BUOY.

INDEED WHEN WE ARE FIRMLY ANCHORED IN CHRIST- OUR JOY IN THE LORD AND GRATITUDE TO GOD REMAINS EVEN IN TROUBLING TIMES.

EXAMPLES OF THIS IN REAL LIFE ARE NOT ALWAYS EASY TO FIND, BECAUSE THEY CAN BE HARD TO PUT INTO WORDS.

BUT I FOUND A WONDERFUL EXPRESSION OF JOY IN THE WRITINGS OF A FORMER PASTOR OF THIS CHURCH, THE REV. DR. CARLTON WU.

IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO HIS BOOK “FROM THE YELLOW RIVER TO LAKE CHAMPLAIN”, HE WROTE:

“ONE REASON I WANTED TO WRITE THIS BOOK IS TO EXPRESS MY GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR HIS WONDERFUL LOVE AND GUIDANCE IN MY LIFE.

GOD HAS BEEN GOOD TO ME EVERY STEP OF MY LIFE. GOD IS A FAITHFUL GOD.”

THROUGHOUT HIS WORK THERE IS AN UNDERLYING SPIRIT OF JOY IN THE LORD TO BE FOUND IN THE STORY, INCLUDING WHEN THERE WAS DISAPPOINTMENT OR DIFFICULTIES IN HIS LIFE.

THIS IS THE KIND OF JOY PAUL WAS SPEAKING ABOUT IN MANY OF HIS LETTERS, INCLUDING TODAY’S READING.

A SIMILAR CALL TO REJOICE IS FOUND IN THE PASSAGE FROM ISAIAH, AND IN THE EXPERIENCE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE WHO HAD FAITH IN GOD’S PROMISES.

THOSE WHO HAD GREAT FAITH WERE THE ONES WHO WORSHIPED THE LORD JOYFULLY RATHER THAN MERELY OUT OF DUTY.

INDEED, FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH, THE ONE TRUE GOD IS THE SOURCE OF OUR JOY.

AND FOR CHRISTIANS JOY IS EVEN MORE SPECIFICALLY FOUND IN JESUS AND THE GIFT OF SALVATION HE BRINGS.

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS EXPRESSIONS OF THIS JOY IS FOUND IN THE HYMN WRITTEN BY ISAAC WATTS: “JOY TO THE WORLD”.

IRONICALLY HE DID NOT INTEND TO WRITE A CHRISTMAS CAROL, BUT RATHER WAS INSPIRED BY PSALM 98, AND SCRIPTURE’S PROMISE JESUS WOULD RETURN TO EARTH.

THE WORDS OF THE HYMN POINT TO THE JOY THAT WILL BE PRESENT WHEN JESUS IS RECEIVED BY THE WHOLE EARTH AS KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

THIS, WE KNOW, DID NOT HAPPEN AT HIS BIRTH OR DURING HIS LIFE, NOR HAS IT YET COME TO PASS, SINCE HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION. BUT IT WILL HAPPEN WHEN JESUS RETURNS.

YET THE POWERFUL HYMN WRITTEN IN ANTICIPATION OF THE SECOND COMING OF THE LORD, FITS JUST AS BEAUTIFULLY INTO OUR CELEBRATION OF HIS BIRTH.

IN MANY WAYS THIS HYMN TIES TOGETHER CHRISTMAS PAST AND PRESENT, AND POINTS US INTO THE FUTURE.

FOR THE JOY THAT WILL BE PRESENT SO STRONGLY THAT HEAVEN AND NATURE WILL SING AND EVERY PERSON REJOICE IN THE REIGN OF CHRIST, IS ONLY POSSIBLE BECAUSE GOD CAME TO US IN JESUS HIS SON.

YES, THE BIRTH OF CHRIST –CHRISTMAS, IS WHAT MAKES HIS RETURN POSSIBLE.

THIS IS WHY WE FOCUS ON JOY ON THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT. WE CAN REJOICE BECAUSE JESUS WAS BORN, AND HIS LIFE MAKES OUR NEW LIFE IN HIM POSSIBLE.

WE REJOICE JESUS WAS BORN, BECAUSE IF HE HAD NOT BEEN, THERE WOULD BE NOT ONLY NO CHRISTMAS- BUT THERE WOULD ALSO BE NO CHANCE OF FORGIVENESS BY GOD-NO SALVATION.

LISTEN TO A POEM THAT I HAVE SEEN ON CHRISTMAS CARDS, ABOUT THIS VERY THING.

IT WAS WRITTEN BY A MAN NAMED ROY LESSIN, AND THE TITLE IS: “GOD SENT US A SAVIOR.” IT SAYS”:

“IF OUR GREATEST NEED HAD BEEN INFORMATION, GOD WOULD HAVE SENT US AN EDUCATOR.

IF OUR GREATEST NEED HAD BEEN TECHNOLOGY, GOD WOULD HAVE SENT A SCIENTIST.

IF OUR GREATEST NEED HAD BEEN MONEY, GOD WOULD HAVE SENT AN ECONOMIST.

IF OUR GREATEST NEED HAD BEEN PLEASURE, GOD WOULD HAVE SENT AN ENTERTAINER.

BUT OUR GREATEST NEED WAS FORGIVENESS, SO GOD SENT US A SAVIOR.”

THE HYMN “SILENT NIGHT”, ALSO EXPRESSES THIS TRUTH, AND THE REASON FOR US TO HAVE JOY DURING THIS SEASON, AND INDEED ALWAYS.

PART OF THE LYRICS PROCLAIM: “GLORIES STREAMS FROM HEAVEN AFAR, HEAVENLY HOST SING ALLELUIAS, CHRIST THE SAVIOR IS BORN.”

AND ANOTHER VERSE REMINDS US WHY HIS BIRTH, WHY CHRISTMAS IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO REMEMBER AND CELEBRATE:

“SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT. SON OF GOD, LOVES PURE LIGHT. RADIANT BEAMS FROM THY HOLY FACE, WITH THE DAWN OF REDEEMING GRACE. JESUS LORD AT THY BIRTH.”

THUS THE JOY OF THE SEASON IS NOT SO MUCH ABOUT WHAT KIND OF CHRISTMAS WE ARE EXPERIENCING THIS YEAR, BUT RATHER DRAWN FROM OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS JESUS.

OUR ATTITUDE CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE IN HOW WE DEAL WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS IN LIFE, AS WELL AS WHEN OUR EXPECTATIONS ARE MET, OR EVEN EXCEEDED.

I READ ABOUT PARENTS WHO RAISED THEIR CHILDREN TO SEE CHRISTMAS AS JESUS’ BIRTHDAY.

THEY WERE TAUGHT TO VIEW ALL THE GIFTS THEY RECEIVED, AND DECORATIONS AND FOOD THEY ENJOYED, AS BEING ABOUT CELEBRATING HIS SPECIAL DAY.

ONE CHRISTMAS WHEN SOME FRIENDS STOPPED BY TO VISIT, ONE OF THE CHILDREN WAS ASKED IF SHE GOT EVERYTHING SHE WANTED FOR CHRISTMAS.

THE CHILD REPLIED “NO, BUT THEN IT’S NOT MY BIRTHDAY.”

WHAT A GOOD WAY TO VIEW ANY DISAPPOINTMENTS WE MAY EXPERIENCE DURING THIS SEASON.

CHRISTMAS, AFTER ALL IS REALLY ABOUT THE GIFT OF JESUS, RATHER THAN WHAT EVER OTHER GIFTS WE MAY RECEIVE.

THERE IS A LEGEND ABOUT A KING OF PERSIA, WHICH GIVES US ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THIS ATTITUDE.

THE KING LOVED TO MINGLE WITH HIS PEOPLE IN DISGUISE, SO ONE DAY HE DRESSED AS A POOR MAN, AND DESCENDED THE LONG FLIGHT OF STAIRS TO THE CELLAR IN THE CASTLE.

THERE HE VISITED WITH A MAN, WHO USUALLY TENDED THE FURNACE IN THE PALACE.

THE KING SAT DOWN BESIDE HIM AND BEGAN TO TALK. THE FURNACE TENDER SHARED HIS SIMPLE MEAL WITH THE KING, WHOM HE DID NOT RECOGNIZE.

THE KING SOON WENT AWAY, BUT RETURNED AGAIN AND AGAIN FOR HIS HEART WAS FILLED WITH SYMPATHY FOR THE LONELY MAN.

THEY BECAME VERY GOOD FRIENDS. THEN, AS TIME PASSED, THE KING DECIDED TO TELL THE MAN WHO HE IS, AND OFFER TO GIVE HIM WHATEVER GIFT HE ASKED FOR.

BUT WHEN THE KING DID SO, WHILE THE MAN, WAS PLEASED AND SURPRISED, HE DIDN’T ASK FOR ANYTHING.

THE KING WAS ASTONISHED AND SAID, “DON’T YOU REALIZE THAT I CAN GIVE YOU ANYTHING IN MY KINGDOM YOU WANT?”

THE MAN REPLIED, “I UNDERSTAND YOUR MAJESTY. BUT YOU HAVE ALREADY GIVEN THE GREATEST GIFT A MAN COULD RECEIVE.

YOU LEFT YOUR THRONE TO SIT WITH ME HERE IN THIS DARK AND LONELY PLACE. YOU COULD GIVE ME NOTHING MORE PRECIOUS.

YOU HAVE GIVEN YOURSELF- AND THAT IS FAR MORE THAN I COULD EVER DESERVE.”

THIS IS NOT UNLIKE WHAT GOD DID FOR US THROUGH THE INCARNATION OF JESUS.

BOTH THE STORY ABOUT THE CHILD’S UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTMAS, AND THE STORY OF THE KING AND THE LOWLY CASTLE WORKER, POINT US TO THE REASON WE CELEBRATE THE SEASON.

WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS, AND THE TIME THAT LEADS UP TO THE DAY, BECAUSE WE REMEMBER AND REJOICE THAT JESUS CAME TO US, AND THAT HE WILL COME AGAIN INTO THE WORLD.

LET US PRAY:

HEAVENLY FATHER, YOU HAVE GIVEN US YOUR GREATEST GIFT—JESUS, YOUR SON, WHO CAME TO EARTH, TO LIVE WITH US, AND TO SAVE US FROM OUR SIN.

THROUGH HIM AND THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, YOU HAVE FILLED US WITH YOUR GRACE AND TRUTH, NOT JUST DURING THIS SPECIAL TIME OF THE YEAR, BUT ALWAYS.

RECEIVE OUR THANKS AND PRAISE, AND TEACH US TO REJOICE ALWAYS IN CHRIST OUR LORD.

MAY WE INDEED, BE AMONG THE FAITHFUL WHO REJOICE IN CELEBRATING THE BIRTHDAY OF JESUS, AS WE WAIT HIS GLORIOUS RETURN.

IN THE NAME OF OUR SAVIOR AND FRIEND WE PRAY. AMEN

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