

## Isaiah 61:1-3,10-11

Advent 3; December 17, 2023

For the four weeks of Advent, this question is asked by nearly every usher team here at St. Paul's: *Which candles get lit on the Advent Wreath? Do we light the pink one today?* Today, that question will be answered with a "yes." Today is Pink Candle Sunday! Why? Why do we light the pink candle today on the Advent Wreath? What does the PINK candle mean? In the early Christian Church, the color pink represented rejoicing. The readings for this Sunday begin to take a turn. In the first two Sundays of Advent, we have seen that our King wants us to watch and wait for his return at the end of the world. We saw that John the Baptist came to bring the Good News about Jesus to God's people. Because Jesus will come again bringing Judgement and Good News, the only response that the Christian can have is to rejoice. The readings begin to transition from the thought of repentance and preparation to one of celebration. The light of the Savior is about to shine in a sin-darkened world.

That's the message that the prophet Isaiah brought to God's people 750 years before Jesus would walk on this earth. God wanted his people know that he had not forgotten them. Even though the darkness of sin was all around them, he wanted them to know that the Light was coming. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus identifies himself as being this servant that Isaiah writes about today. **"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim 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."**

I cannot imagine what it would be like to live in complete darkness for days or weeks or years. Can you imagine being a prisoner locked away in a dungeon that has no windows, has no light coming under the door? Can you imagine not even knowing if it is day or night outside? That's the picture that Isaiah is painting for us today when he describes God's people being released from darkness. Then one day the door opens and light comes pouring into that dark cell. You have been set free. Your prison term is not just over. You have been totally pardoned. It is done. You are a free man.

Can you imagine the joy that now is yours? Joy and happiness are an interesting thing. Joy is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is an emotion. Joyfulness is a condition. Happiness comes from your circumstances. Joyfulness comes from your King entering into your heart and assuring you of his abiding love and your glorious future. Therefore, happiness is fleeting. Joyfulness is enduring. In our second lesson for today, Paul writes: **"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."** This is who we are. Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving mark the Christian's behavior whether he is experiencing success or failure, pain and or pleasure, illness or health, popularity or persecution. You are a forgiven child of God, loved unconditionally and destined for heaven. The Gospel is more than enough reason for joy, prayer and thanksgiving at all times. That is the joy we have.

There once was a man whose name was Isaac Watts. He was a hymn writer. He wrote over 750 in the late 1600's and early 1700's. There are quite a few of hymns that are used by us quite regularly by us and Christianity as a whole. At this time of year, there is one of his hymns that we are very familiar with. The title for the hymn is "Joy to the World." Did you know that that hymn was not written with the birth of Jesus in mind? The basis for the hymn is found in Psalm 98.

**<sup>1</sup> Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. <sup>2</sup> The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. <sup>3</sup> He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. <sup>4</sup> Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; <sup>5</sup> make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, <sup>6</sup> with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—shout for joy before the Lord, the King. <sup>7</sup> Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. <sup>8</sup> Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; <sup>9</sup> let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity."**

Psalm 98 speaks of the joy that the entire creation will experience upon Christ's return. The seas and the mountains will all sing for joy. Christ will come as King upon the earth. That's exactly what Watts wrote about in his hymn. The rocks, fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains cannot contain their excitement when the Savior comes back to reign upon the earth. This King brings joy to the world. If you look closely at the hymn, there is no mention of shepherds, angel choirs or wise

men. There is no mention of Bethlehem, Mary or even the baby Jesus. He does talk about what Jesus came to do. He came to go to a cross so that sins and sorrows grow. Nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow. He comes to bring to this world victory over Satan. Now he rules the world with truth and grace.

That's the joy that Jesus brings to you and me and the people of the world. Now before you think that I'm against singing Joy to the World at Christmas time, I want to reassure you that I'm not. Even though Isaac Watts had Jesus' return to this earth on the last day, he gives us more than enough reasons to look at the birth of Jesus and to rejoice at what he comes to bring.

Isaiah speaks about what Jesus will bring to us. **"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 his 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."** Living with joy is more than a feeling, a moment or even an attitude. Joy penetrates every aspect of our lives. Does that mean that we will always be happy? No. Our joy will not be perfect on this side of heaven. We will still have struggles. We will have our ups and downs. Yet, we can join with the Apostle Peter in saying: **"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy."** (1 Peter 1:8) As we look forward to the birth of Jesus next week, may your hearts be filled with joy. Amen.