

# A Promise of Joy

## Isaiah 61:1-3,10-11 (Advent 3)

This time of year is supposed to be a season of joy. The songs of the season sing of that joy. When you open up your gifts, there is a certain joy when you see that it is something you really wanted. There is a slightly different kind of joy when you see it is something you didn't expect, but is a pleasant surprise. You hadn't asked for it or didn't really think about it, but someone just gave it to you. Perhaps your joy has nothing to do with the gift itself. It wasn't a fancy or an expensive gift but someone very special gave it to you. Things like homemade cards and little notes from your spouse, children, or grandchildren bring joy to our hearts. Sometimes those are even better than the best most expensive gifts money could buy.

Some gifts don't give us any joy at all. Have you ever opened up a present that you absolutely hated? Your reaction was to be as polite as possible so as not to hurt their feelings. Perhaps you say something like, "Umm...thank you. It's just what I always wanted." All the while you are thinking, "That is the most hideous thing I have ever seen. I have no use for that at all. Did they include a gift receipt? When does Target open tomorrow so I can exchange it?" That Christmas gift didn't give you joy at all.

If Christmas promises to bring joy that is only shallowly sung about and is determined by how much we enjoy the gifts we are given, then what happens when it isn't so joyful? What about when you are handed something that is the very opposite of joy - sorrow? In the last week or two alone, it seems like that promised joy of the season is far away. It's been a struggle at home as a leaky dishwasher turned into a job of ripping up a bunch of flooring in my kitchen. I learned of more people who are now being affected directly by COVID, people within our own church. I sat by the bedside of someone who within a matter of hours would take her final breath as a result of cancer.

Think of all that is happening around you. Does it sound like this Christmas is bringing much joy to your life? It seems to be more like the gift that is absolutely hideous. We feel like prisoners held captive to our sorrows. We would do anything to exchange that sorrow for joy, but we can't. As long as sin is present, those sorrows remain. Yet for us our Advent and the upcoming Christmas season is not a time of shallow and empty feeling joy. Jesus' coming means there is a great Christmas exchange. Chains of captivity are exchanged for freedom. Sorrow is exchanged for joy. Born in Bethlehem, Jesus was anointed to do just that. **"The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the afflicted. He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion, to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, a cloak of praise instead of a faint spirit, so that they will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD to display his beauty."** (vs. 1-3)

In Bible times anointing was the designated way to induct kings and priests. As oil was poured on heads, so they were anointed to carry out whatever work God had tasked for them serving in those roles. God's promise through Isaiah here speaks about one coming whom the Lord will anoint. The Messiah, which means the "Anointed One" would bring about that desired exchange so that God's promise of joy in the Savior would be kept. Jesus' coming at Christmas isn't just a nice, feel-good story that we hear every year to cheer us up and provide content for our carols. Anointed to serve as Savior, God's plan for Jesus at his coming was for him to bring good news to us who are afflicted by sin. Jesus was anointed to bandage our wounded hearts shattered by sin. Jesus was anointed to proclaim freedom for those held captive by sin exchanging captivity for freedom and sorrow for joy.

This Christmas as you look at his little hands that you see reaching out from those cloths in which he was wrapped, imagine those hands wounded with nails for you. Looking beyond the manger to his cross, you hear him proclaiming the good news of freedom and release as he declared the work he was anointed to be finished. Freedom from sin and the sorrow it causes is what Jesus was coming to do. A few chapters earlier, Isaiah wrote, **“Surely he was taking up our weaknesses, and he was carrying our sufferings. We thought it was because of God that he was stricken, smitten, and afflicted, but it was because of our rebellion that he was pierced. He was crushed for the guilt our sins deserved. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (53:4-5)**

Through Jesus God’s grace is proclaimed and given! He comforts all who mourn hopelessly in all their sorrows exchanging the captivity of sin for freedom from sin. My friends, we have seen so far this Advent season how God’s promise is a promise of hope and peace, but the promise of the Lord’s anointed Savior’s coming is also a promise that exchanges our sorrows for joy knowing the freedom he comes to give us. Jesus came born in Bethlehem to bring about that great Christmas exchange where even the sorrows that sin causes and seems to keep us captive are now exchanged for joy.

Isaiah speaks of that exchange with three different pictures. Instead of ashes, we are given a crown of beauty. Ashes were a symbol of sorrow. When people sat in ashes it was a sign of humiliation. Crowns and headdresses were symbols of joy and worn at joyful times. Instead of mourning, he gives the oil of joy. To put on aromatic oil, or perfume, was a custom not for sorrowful occasions, but joyful ones. Instead of being clothed with a faint, weakening spirit because of all that sorrow, we are clothed with a cloak of praise because joy fills our hearts that have been made strong as oaks of righteousness.

When we think of oak trees we think of big, strong, durable trees that withstand the storms. The oaks in the area of Israel were also strong and durable trees. Isaiah pictures believers as such trees made strong because they find their right standing with God not in themselves, but in God’s promise. When we look to ourselves, we only find the weakness of sorrow, guilt, and shame. Instead we find our right standing before God in the promised Messiah, the Anointed One. As a planting of the Lord and his grace we are nourished by the promises of the Lord. We are made strong and are like enduring trees that display the beauty, glory, and might of his grace in a world of sorrow and sin. My friends, our sorrow has indeed been exchanged for joy, joy worth celebrating this Advent and Christmas season as God has placed new clothing upon us through Jesus. **“I will rejoice greatly in the LORD. My soul will celebrate because of my God, for he has clothed me in garments of salvation. With a robe of righteousness he covered me, like a bridegroom who wears a beautiful headdress like a priest, and like a bride who adorns herself with her jewelry.” (vs. 10)**

There is certainly some joy in receiving new clothing that you were wanting or maybe that you need. Someone gave you that new sweater, shirt, tie, suit, dress, whatever that new clothing is, even if it was something as simple as socks to replace what was worn out. Instead of having to go out and get it yourself, you can just joyfully put it on and wear that gift. Isn’t that how it is for us because of God’s promise in Jesus? God is the one who gave him to us. Through Jesus, God has exchanged the chains and prison clothes of sin with beautiful garments of salvation’s freedom. He has covered over our sins with a robe of his perfect righteousness, robes given to us on the day of our baptism.

When that water was poured on your head baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, salvation through Jesus was given to you. Jesus’ righteousness is placed upon you. The Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 3, **“In fact, you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Indeed, as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ...And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants and heirs according to the promise.” (3:26-27,29)** We rejoice every day at our baptism through which God has made

us beautiful before him like a bride and groom on their wedding day. With the 4K and Kindergarten classroom right next to my office, so often I hear a joyful song of praise about their baptism. Our joy joins theirs. "I was baptized happy day, all my sins were washed away. God looked down on me and smiled. I became his own dear child."

God promised a great Christmas exchange which would cause joy to fill our hearts. Just as God causes plants to grow on the earth and seeds grow in gardens, so as surely as God promised, he would cause this exchange to happen for all to see. **"For as the earth produces its growth, and as a garden causes what has been sown to sprout up, so God the LORD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up in the presence of all the nations."(vs. 11)** Through Jesus, God's Anointed Savior, good news is proclaimed and his promise is kept. The chains of sins captivity are exchanged for the joy of freedom from sin. Sorrow because of sin is exchanged the joy of knowing God has clothed with the garments of salvation and covered with robes of righteousness.

This joy fills our hearts every day and is heard from our lips and is even lived in how we live our lives. Yes sorrow and sadness continue to affect our life all because sin still affects this world. However our joy is not diminished as we wait for one more exchange to happen. Filled with the joy of Jesus' first advent born in Bethlehem to be our Savior, we long for another promise of joy to be fulfilled. When Jesus returns at his second advent, he will exchange all sorrow we feel at times in this sin-filled world for joy that is free of sin and lasts forever. With joyful anticipation we look forward to that last great exchange. Amen



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