

“The Coming JOY”

Is. 61:1-4; 1 Thess. 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 23

At our Thursday morning Men’s Group study... which, by the way guys, there is ALWAYS an open chair... we are considering the book Making Sense of the Bible. Yes, the same one that we are also studying with our brethren from FCC. Albeit at a MUCH slower pace... ☺ Anyway, in this week’s discussion we were talking about how relevant the Scriptures were to our daily lives. And my brother Mark J. reminded us of something we had read in the book that really ‘jumpstarted’ this group nearly 6 years ago, The 4:8 Principle (Based on Phil. 4:8...) Author Tommy Newberry suggested that we get in the habit of inserting our own name into passages from the Bible to make them more personal, more *relevant*. For example, in that most foundational verse in our Christian faith, **John 3:16**:

“For God so loved (NAME), that he gave His only begotten Son.

That if (NAME) believe in Him, (NAME) shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

It brings God’s love to a much more ‘up close and personal’ basis, and makes one appreciate the individual concern that our ‘big, big God’ has for ‘little ol’ ME.’ It reminds us of how each one of us has a very personal interest, and response-ability, in God’s plan for this ‘big ol’ world.

And so, as we continue in our Advent series that focuses on both how Jesus has ‘already’ come, but has ‘not yet’ returned, we will move from Jesus as the coming HOPE, and the coming PEACE, to our Lord as **“The Coming JOY.”** AND, the very important role that WE have in helping to **spread** that ‘JOY.’ And we will consider our part in ‘spreading that joy’ through the eyes of the prophet Isaiah, the Apostle Paul, and the ‘Baptizer’ John...

Despite the fact that Isaiah wrote his prophetic words nearly 700 years before Christ, I believe that those words apply to us Christians just as much today as they did to the ancient Israelites. First of all, in that very first verse of Ch. 61, Isaiah says ***“The spirit of the Lord God is upon ME.”*** (Isa. 61:1) CAN YOU SAY THAT WITH ME? How many of you **believe** that?! Well, believe it or not, **I** believe that God’s Spirit is at work IN you, and ‘UPON’ you, this very moment... whether you like it or not! Convicting you of how He wants you to function as His

follower. Let us continue in the call that God placed on the great prophet, AND on us 'NOT-so-great' ones... (again, saying it with me): ***“he has sent ME to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...to comfort all who mourn...”*** (Isaiah 61:1-2)

In the same way that God chose Isaiah to be His spokesman, His representative, so too has God chosen YOU to speak to others on His behalf. So too does He SEND you to be a source of good news to those who feel oppressed... to help bind up the wounds of those whose hearts have been broken... to offer freedom to those imprisoned by addictions, by fear, by broken relationships. YOU are the one to ***“comfort all who mourn,”*** and give to them ***“the oil of gladness instead of mourning... the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”***

SAY WHAT? ***“Oil of gladness”?*** ***“mantle of praise”?*** Just what does Isaiah mean by *that*? Well, in his time, it was common practice for a host to anoint the head of an honored guest in their home with oil... a powerful demonstration of just how GLAD the host was to have that person there. For a person who may be mourning the loss of a loved one, they can often feel like their life is now incomplete... that they are not the same with that person gone. This is especially true during holidays and special occasions. And we must be sensitive to those to whom we can demonstrate just how SPECIAL that they STILL are. Not only to US, but to the 'host' of the ultimate 'dinner party' in heaven, the 'wedding feast of the Lamb,' Jesus Christ.

And in truth, it's not only those who are suffering loss who need to be reminded of their worth. There are any number of people who need to be reminded of their value in God's eyes. Sometimes, that very person who might not appear to need any affirmation AT ALL. I believe that whether we admit it or not, **each one of us** appreciates an expression of the belief that our lives are valuable. That we are doing something of value and worth with this 'bag of bones' that we are. You and I need to be about putting a ***“mantle of praise”*** on others... particularly those who are suffering from a ***“faint spirit.”*** To borrow from Isaiah's 'large' imagery, we are made to be ***“oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD, to display his glory.”***(Isa. 61:3) That 'tower of strength' that provides a place of safety, security, refreshment. An unshakable source of calm and protection... whose strength comes from the depth of its root in its soil, its 'foundation'. You know, like the 'Church's One Foundation,' Jesus Christ...

Well, this all SOUNDS great, doesn't it? Of how we are sent by God to heal broken hearts, to comfort others, honoring them with praise and appreciation. But just how do we prepare OURSELVES to be such messengers of God's love and grace? In our efforts to boost the spirits of others, how can we avoid what Paul warns the church to guard against: ***"Do not quench the Spirit."*** How do we not allow the woes of our personal lives to 'stifle... suppress... extinguish' the working of God's Spirit within us?

As we look at the words of Paul to the Thessalonians, I would lift up the opening verses: ***"REJOICE always... PRAY without ceasing... give THANKS in all circumstances."*** THREE ways to avoid the 'quenching' of the Spirit in our lives...

First, ***"Rejoice always."*** "REJOICE." From the French, "*re-joir.*" "*joir*" = "JOY." (as in, 'le joir de vivre.')

"Re-" = "AGAIN." Or "with great force." Every day, when you get up in the morning, you and I should 'rejoice' with 'great force' that God has given us another day to live for HIM! That 'once again' we will have opportunities to make a difference in another person's life. Another day to consider the majesty of an oak tree, or the beauty of a child, or the wonder of a sunrise or sunset. In the words of a church song I learned a LONG time ago, *"Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say 'REJOICE!'"*

Next Paul exhorts his readers... US... to ***"Pray without ceasing."*** Note what he does NOT say: 'Pray only on Sunday morning between 9-10/11-12.' 'Pray only when you've exhausted all other options for a problem you have.' 'Pray only when you feel like it.' NO. To ***"pray without ceasing."*** To borrow from our opening response in worship, *'We should pray... all the time. And all the time... we should pray.'*

What does that word "PRAY" mean, anyway? Well, back to the 'Gospel acc. to Webster,' to 'pray' means to "ask earnestly, or *anxiously.*" It is related to words that mean "to treat, act toward", or "to handle." More than only a sincere, or anxious, **request**, it is a **manner** in which we 'treat' or 'act toward' God. Our demonstration that we need God's help to 'handle' the burdens of our everyday lives. ***'EVERY-DAY!'*** You know how you see someone talking on one of those earbud bluetooths, and they appear to be talking to themselves? And they look like they're maybe a bit 'Looney Tunes?' Well, you and I need to be seen as a little more 'looney' as we communicate on our own version of that: 'GOD-tooth!'

"We should pray... all the time. And all the time... we should pray."

And finally, the third way that Paul encourages us to NOT 'quench the Spirit' is to **"give thanks in all circumstances."** Now, I don't think that I would get *much* argument with the statement that 'you and I do not give thanks to God enough for the many blessings we enjoy.' Right? Like, when was the last time you gave thanks for 'indoor plumbing?' 'Electricity.' 'The air we breathe.' 'HVAC.' (Now, we likely have something to say when these DON'T work...) In general, there is a LOT we take for granted. But, to give thanks in 'ALL' circumstances? We all have had those experiences that it would be downright 'foolish' to give thanks for. Catastrophic loss, due to violence, or natural disasters. Serious illness. Loss of loved ones.

And yet, even in the midst of those terrible experiences, as we look back on them, we see how God carried us through those times. Often times in the form of His human 'messengers.' Those **'friends who stick closer than a brother or sister.'**

As we consider [**our sister Joyce Carr//brother and sister Ed and Helen Wild**], I know that she would certainly not have 'given thanks' for the 'circumstance' of [**her husband's passing// their grandson's tragic loss**]. BUT I also know that they and their families were VERY thankful for the love and support they received from friends like YOU! Thankful for the God that you represent... the One who has promised NEVER to leave nor forsake us. Especially in our most trying times...

And so, in closing, I'd leave you with two 'abbreviations,' two acronyms, that relate to the manner in which you and I are to represent the "coming Joy" this Advent Season.

First, **RPT**. Which stand both for Paul's 'triple of tribute' to God: **Rejoice. Pray. Thanks**. And what 'RPT' can also be an abbreviation for: REPEAT! "Rejoice. Pray. Thanks." "Repeat." "Rejoice. Pray. Thanks." Please say it with me...

And second, and most importantly, the best way for you to show God's joy in your life is to, as we started this message out with, to put yourself in the Scriptures. Particularly our Gospel reading concerning John. *"There was a 'person' sent from God, whose name was ...[insert name].⁷ He [and she] came as a witness to testify to the light, so that ALL might believe through him."* (John 1:6-7) And that the **reason** that you can best 'testify' to the Light is

contained in the word **“JOY”** itself. Because **“JESUS OCCUPIES YOU”**! Let the JOY of HIS Light shine! **“So that all might believe through YOU.”** And all God’s ‘joyful lights’ said... AMEN!

CHARGE

I would remind you of the closing words of today’s passage from *Isaiah*:

*“They will be called **oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.**”⁴ **They SHALL build up the ancient ruins; they SHALL raise up the former devastations; they SHALL repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.**”* For the many of you that **[Remember the glory of a church from days gone by // came from our long-time previous location]**, you may sometimes wonder ‘WHY?’ **[‘What purpose does God have for us in our current situation? // ‘Why did God take such a beautiful place of worship from us?’]** Which is probably just what the ancient Israelites, our ancestors in faith, asked themselves in the loss of their beautiful temple... their ‘glory’ from days gone by.

And I would say it was to allow us to, in our own small way, fulfill God’s plan as articulated by Isaiah. To ‘build up and repair’ the ancient ‘ruins’ of a once- prosperous congregation. But not to simply ‘build’ a church... but rather, to BE the church. You and I, my friends, are intended to be a **“planting of the Lord,”** in order to **“display his glory.”** And as we go forth to ‘display God’s glory,’ may we NEVER forget that we do NOT go alone. For the Spirit of the Living God is...

And is **‘UPON’** you to give you peace. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, ALL of God’s **“oaks of righteousness”** said, **“AMEN!”**