

December 31, 2017 – Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

Well, it's over. The presents are unwrapped. The leftovers are sitting in the refrigerator. Stacks of Christmas cards litter our tables and shelves. Uneaten cookies fill tins and tubs and trays all over the house. There are no more Christmas movies on TV. No more Christmas songs on the radio. It's all over.

And maybe you're feeling a bit of relief that it's all over. That there's nothing more to buy, wrap, mail, or bake. I know I personally am glad to put three services in two days behind me. In a few days, school will start up again. The schedule will return to normal. And all of this insanity will be behind us.

And yet, for many of you, I suspect the days ahead will also be tinged with a bit of letdown. No more anticipation. No more excitement. No more family and friends filling our homes. And what will we have gained from it all? Probably some credit card debt to pay off. Maybe a few extra pounds to work off from too many of those cookies I mentioned.

And, of course, winter. A long and apparently very, very cold winter. That's really just beginning. And promises many more weeks of cold and snow, short days and bare trees before spring finally begins. The psychologists call it "Seasonal Affective Disorder." Most of us think of it as simply "the winter blues."

So in the midst of this time when all the excitement is starting to wind down, our scripture lessons this morning are a sharp contrast. A reminder that while the rest of the world may end their festivities on Christmas, in the church, the season of Christmas begins on Christmas.

Because these scripture readings are, from beginning to end, joyful. Some of the most joyful lessons you'll read all year. And it's not just the words that are joyful. The images are joyful too.

Our Old Testament lesson has two of them. The first is of a bride and groom at their wedding. Each of them in their finest clothes. The groom dressed to the nines. The bride covered in precious jewels. Each one so excited to be getting married that they want to look their absolute best for their new spouse.

The second is, ironically, of springtime. Which I think we can all appreciate right now. It's an image of a garden in which seeds have been planted. And one day the gardener walks out and sees the entire field covered in green sprouts. And he can almost taste the tomatoes and strawberries and green beans and sweet corn that are just around the corner.

Our Epistle lesson has a joyful image as well. The image of an adoption. Of a new family that's been brought together. Of a little boy or girl who had nothing at all. No family. No home. No love in their life.

And now, suddenly, they have a mother and a father. And a home. And more love than they've ever known. Such that they cry out, "Abba! Father!" Because they are overwhelmed with the feeling of being adopted as sons and daughters.

Even our Gospel lesson has a joyful image in it. Not a metaphor, like the others. But an actual event. An old man and an old woman, named Simeon and Anna. Each of whom was waiting. For what, they really didn't even know completely.

Simeon knew he was waiting for the Lord's Christ, the Lord's anointed one. But what that anointed one would look like, he didn't know. Anna was waiting for Israel's redemption. She was waiting with fasting and prayer. Waiting in the temple, day after day. But she had no idea how or when it would happen. She just knew she had to wait.

Two people, waiting their entire lives for *something* to happen. And then it does. Imagine it. Waiting by blind faith your entire life. And then, suddenly, it's sitting right in front of you. Simeon sees the Lord's Christ. Anna sees Israel's redemption. And it fills them with joy.

That's what Christmas is supposed to be. Not a time when our anticipation ends, and we are engulfed with melancholy and Seasonal Affective Disorder. But a time when our joy begins.

God has sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law. The wedding is at hand. The garden has begun to sprout. We have joined our new, adoptive family. The wait is over. And this is only the beginning. Now is a time for joy.

So why is it so hard sometimes to be joyful? Why can't Christmas joy last all year? Why do we struggle with something that the Bible indicates should be so obvious?

Well, like anything sad or painful in this world, the answer is sin. That's over-simplifying it. And it certainly doesn't give us a solution. But it's a start.

Because, for one thing, sin clouds our view of the world. When the angels arrived to shepherds that Christmas night, they proclaimed divine peace to all mankind. The war between God and man was over. The moment Christ was born, things changed.

And what we read in our lessons this morning is a reflection of that change. Joy, like that of a bride and groom. Life, like that of a garden in spring. Love, like that of an adoptive family. Hope, like that of two people waiting their entire lives.

But that kind of peace, joy, life, love, and hope is often hard to see in our own lives. What we see in our own lives is discord between family members. And pain from disease and cancer. And grief from death.

We see sin. Like a choking cloud descending upon our lives. And one day of Christmas presents and Christmas carols isn't going to change that.

So the sin around us obscures the joy of Christmas. But the sin within us also clouds that joy as well. You know, it's interesting that Isaiah would say all these joyful, hopeful words in chapter 61. Because for the 60 chapters prior, he's had very little but judgement for the people of Israel.

Page upon page of the harshest condemnations you can possibly imagine. Criticizing their idolatry, their treatment of the poor, their corrupt government, their unjust laws, their empty worship. And then he gets to chapter 62 and he says, *"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch."*

In others words, he's saying, "Look, I know you don't want to hear this. I know you think I'm saying all this just because I'm a prophet and I'm supposed to be hard on you. But, really and truly, I'm doing this for your sake. I'm doing this for your good. Because I want you to know the joy of God's salvation.

A joy that goes beyond your greed and lust and idolatry and corruption. A joy that fills your life with a peace that passes all understanding. And if I keep quiet, you'll never know that joy. If you don't repent of your own sinfulness, you'll never know God's forgiveness."

Sometimes it's our own sin that clouds our joy after Christmas. Sometimes we have to admit that we were only using Christmas as a distraction from the bitterness we've held in our hearts. As an excuse to indulge in greed and gluttony. As an opportunity to idolize the things of this world over the things of God.

Whatever clouds your joy after Christmas. Whether the sin of the world around you. Or the sin within your own heart. The message of Christmas is there for you. The message of salvation for all mankind does not diminish just because you can't see it.

So if you're weighed down by discord between family and friends, know that the God who made peace with sinful man can make peace between sinful people too. If you're saddened by grief and loss, know that the God who causes new life to sprout in the spring will one day bring new life into all world.

And if you're crushed under the condemnation of the Law and know that it is your own sin that has divided you from your Lord, know that the baby who was born for you is also the man who died for you. That the salvation which Simeon saw in his arms is your salvation. Your forgiveness. Your light and hope in a dark, despairing world.

Truth be told, I can't promise that this winter will always be filled with the kind of joy we find in our lessons today. Simeon and Anna waited a long time to see the Lord's Christ and the Israel's redemption. And sometimes our lives are filled with waiting as well.

But just as we wait for the Lord in our times of sadness and grief and shame, he waits for us too. He waits for us in the manger. He waits for us on the cross. He waits for us standing beside an empty tomb. He waits for us with Christmas joy. That we too may depart in peace. Amen.