

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

What's So Merry About Christmas?

The First Sunday After Christmas Day
December 27, 2009

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Hebrews 10:5-10

Isaiah 61:10-11, 62:1-3 (NIV)

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 righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ 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.

¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. ² The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. ³ You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Merry Christmas! I hope you're still enjoying the wonder of this great season. We're on the threshold of a new year, but of course we began the new Christian year five weeks ago on the First Sunday of Advent. We begin the Christian Year by focusing our attention on the coming of Christ in Advent, and then with the astounding reality of the birth of the Son of God at Christmas. In a real sense, Jesus is the beginning of all things. As John says in our gospel, "**In the**

beginning was the Word.” And of course that “Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

But what does that have to do with “Merry Christmas?” In one sense, it really doesn’t have much to do with it at all, does it? We all know that the pre-Christian inhabitants of Europe had long had midwinter festivals at the winter solstice, when the day was at its shortest. The idea was to welcome the return of sun and encourage it as it made the days longer and longer, moving everything towards springtime. When Christianity came, it simply took over these midwinter festivals. The darkness of winter was a great time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, **“the light of men,” “the light [that] shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”**

Celebrations and merrymaking had long been part of the pagan winter festivals, and so they became part of the Christian Christmas as well. In fact, the earliest written records we have of the word “Christmas” are references to midwinter festivals held by the ancient Saxon kings of England.

So, what’s so merry about Christmas? Is it just an excuse to escape the boredom and routine of being cooped up indoors in the middle of winter and to get out and have parties and exchange gifts? Not at all. The prophet Isaiah knew what he was celebrating when he wrote our text nearly eight hundred years before Jesus was ever born. He says, **“I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.”** The literal Hebrew says, “being elated, I will be elated” in the Lord”. Why? **“For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”**

Why is Isaiah, through the Holy Spirit, so elated about things like **“righteousness”** and **“salvation”**? Because he has seen God’s point of view on the reality of the human condition. He has realized his own dire predicament. You may remember Isaiah’s call from chapter 6, how he saw the Lord **“high and lifted up”**, his retinue of angels and glory filling the entire temple. Isaiah was struck with horror at his own unholiness and the sin of God’s people Israel. He said, **“Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (Isaiah 6:5)** Then the Lord sent one of the angels with a live coal from the altar, and touched his lips and his sins were forgiven, and Isaiah was purified.

God’s treatment of Isaiah is a pattern for all of us. God takes the initiative not only in forgiving sinners of their guilt, but in clothing them with righteousness. Righteousness is simply doing what is right. God always does what

is right. His righteousness extends to helping those who don't know him or acknowledge him to understand their great danger and their need for him, and then giving them his Son Jesus Christ as the supreme, eternal gift of salvation and righteousness. That's something to celebrate! That's something to be merry about!

The metaphor of the deepest darkness of midwinter fits perfectly the deep darkness of the human condition as God sees us without Christ. As Paul says in Ephesians 2, before we come to Christ, we are “**dead in trespasses and sins**” (**Ephesians 2:1**) He includes himself here, though before he knew Christ Paul was a zealous and pious Pharisee who was scrupulously religious. It makes no difference what our religion or lack of it may be. Without the Lord Jesus Christ, God's appointed means of righteousness and salvation, we are like Isaiah: ruined.

God is righteous. He does what is right. He restores our relationship with himself through the atonement in the blood of Jesus. God is the one who initiates it. If Jesus had never been born, if we'd never heard of Jesus, we'd be left to our own devices.

That's what's so merry about Christmas. God has seen our need. He has seen the deep darkness of human life on this planet and sent the light into it. By our faith in Christ, God clothes us in a garment of salvation. He deflects the penalty for our sin onto his own well-beloved Son. In the gift of Jesus, God arrays us in a robe of righteousness. He counts the righteousness of the Son of God himself as our own. Because of Christ, God the Father sees not Mario Gonzalez, sinner, but the perfect righteousness of his own Son, Jesus Christ. This is good news! This is the salvation the world has been waiting for! This is what makes Christmas merry! Let us pray.