

Westminster Sermon – “Holy and Joyful”

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Luke 2:22-40

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In our first Scripture reading, Isaiah chapter 61 verse 10 through chapter 62 verse 3, we turn once more to the good news offered by the prophet Isaiah to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon. They are still in exile, still in need of comfort, still without hope; yet into this dark place Isaiah sings boldly and unashamedly of the joy found in God. Hear now God’s holy Word.

*10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

*1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. 2 The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. 3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

Our second Scripture reading, Luke chapter 2 verses 22-40, tells one of our very few stories about the infant Jesus. Here Luke stresses the Jewishness of Jesus, emphasizing Mary’s observation of Leviticus’ post-birth purification period, echoing the temple dedication of the baby Samuel by his mother Hannah, and reminding us of the ancient Jewish covenant with God that all firstborn males, both human and animal, belong to the Lord. And yet, in this story that is placed firmly within Jewish tradition, Luke also shows through the prophecies of Simeon and Anna how God is doing a new thing. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

*22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." 33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

*36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of*

*eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: "Holy and Joyful"

*The text: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God..." Isaiah 61:10*

Merry Christmas! Advent is finally over; Christmas has arrived! In fact, we have another week and a half of Christmas: next week will be yet another Sunday to celebrate Christmas! I hope you all have a whole full Christmas season of celebrations planned. The past few days have, after all, only been the beginning! The true celebrations are only just now starting! More food! More presents! More family! More parties!

I am, of course, kidding. More Christmas festivities sound, at least to me, quite frankly, exhausting.

We know that Christmas is 12 days long (in fact, we hear that fact repeated again and again throughout December in song)—we know that Christmas is an entire season in which to celebrate the arrival of Christ and the glory and good news of the incarnation— But we live in a world where Christmas ends on December 25<sup>th</sup>— where all that's left afterwards is trash and bills and left-overs and the sense that it's going to be a very long time till spring.

As Christians, we are caught in this very strange tension, where our society shuts down Christmas on the very day our church tries to begin celebrating it: and we are caught in the middle. We can't help but be carried along with the timing of our society, to be feeling today the post-Christmas letdown—and that doesn't make us bad or wrong, but it does make it hard to listen to Isaiah today—to listen again to the praise and delight with which the infant Christ was met. More Christmas celebrations sound, quite frankly, exhausting.

It makes it hard to listen to Simeon and Anna and their praise and joy and rapture upon meeting the infant Christ—because all of our seasonal anticipations have been met; that which we were culturally waiting for has come and gone, and we are left in the post-Christmas letdown

Yet here we are, gathered today, singing unapologetic songs of praise with Isaiah, *STILL* brazenly rejoicing in the newborn Christ and the good news of the incarnation

Something has changed—everything has changed—the world is different—Christ is born, shout hosanna!

And yet nothing has changed; the world continues on as it did before--we've spent yet another year in longing anticipation of the arrival of Christ; spent another holy night meeting anew the infant Christ; and still the world turns, and God's kingdom is not at hand.

God so loved the world that God became human, even to the point of a helpless newborn; the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us!

-and yet our world still looks the same

-the shepherds have gone home, the angels' song no longer sounds in our ears; Rome is still present in all its power and might—the only difference is this tiny human difference—the only difference is this tiny human who is brought by his proud parents to the temple; a young family bashfully bringing their first born son to be presented .  
-but this visit doesn't go quite as expected.

For two unexpected people meet them there.

Simeon, a righteous man, a holy man, an old man—comes to the temple to find them (all our waiting pales in comparison to Simeon's waiting)—he has waited his whole life to see God's salvation for all people: and he, this holy man, guided by the Spirit, finds it in this tiny child.

Anna, a widow, a prophetess, an 84 year old woman, has spent most of her life in the temple, where first born sons are brought in untold numbers every day to be presented; and she seeks out and finds this particular tiny child, and names him the redemption of Jerusalem.

These holy elders recognize Emmanuel in this baby, brought to the temple by his shyly proud and probably quite confused parents as all first born sons were.

And they PRAISE GOD: they are full of praises for God; like Isaiah, they lift up their voices in praise to God.

What joy! Anna and Simeon have met the salvation and redemption of all people; they, these holy elders, are assured of the Messiah's arrival, of Emmanuel's existence.

And we try to join them in this joy! We try—but Christmas has come and gone, and we're left with trash and bills and leftovers, and a world that hasn't seemed to change all that much.

We want to keep shouting the good news of Christ's arrival; to continue to be heralds of the good tidings of the coming of the Messiah; to tell everyone that God is with us—Emmanuel!

--But Christmas is over, the world is turning its attention to the next holiday, the next thing—it is hard to live as holy and joyful people, singing God's praise without restraint.

-And yet—our Scriptures meet us in this place of tension between the good news and the letdown.

Because Simeon and Anna know that they have met the Messiah: but he is still just an infant: everything has changed, but nothing yet has changed.

This holy man and this holy woman, who know so intimately a joy in their God, know also that this good news is not without its bad news.

As they hold this tiny child and proclaim him the salvation of all people, the redemption of Jerusalem, the glory for Israel and the light for all people—they also foretell the uneasy changes he will bring—that this tiny child will cause the rising and falling of many, that this good news, that this glorious and joyful sign of Emmanuel will be opposed, and ignored, and worse.

Mary and Joseph proudly, bashfully, timidly, like any new parents, bring their first-born son to the temple to be presented and redeemed by the sacrifice of pigeons —for under the law of Moses all first born belong to God.

In bringing the infant Jesus to the temple, Mary and Joseph bring him so that his life might be dedicated to God: and Simeon tells Mary just what dedication this will be: that this life is God's entirely—and that a sword will pierce her soul when she watches this beloved first born child executed in front of her.

This story today rings with the joy and praise we heard on that holy and silent night; but nothing has changed and everything has changed.

The Word is now Flesh; God's kingdom is at hand; this is the good news—but the good news of the incarnation, of the birth of the Christ child, is forever tied to the news of the crucifixion, for the fulfillment of this promise we have been hearing for weeks of a light that will never be overcome by darkness will only fully be met in the empty tomb.

And so maybe our secular culture has actually got it exactly right today.

Today is a day we read Isaiah and offer praise to God, and rejoice in the good news of this tiny Christ child.

But the world still looks much the same, and we have a long road to walk before we are met by the resurrected Christ who is the light that conquers the darkness.

That post-Christmas letdown is maybe how we should feel today: when we are faced with trash and bills and leftovers—all the hard realities of our Christmas celebrations

For here we are—in a world that looks just as it did when we were waiting; and yet everything has changed and the world has been made new.

And so we look to Simeon and Anna, two people who lived, we are told, holy lives, and in a world that seemed as though nothing had changed—they saw that, in fact, nothing was the same—they went out seeking God, seeking in unexpected places the light that was promised and finding this light, this Emmanuel, they also found the path that lay before him: and they faced and named the hard realities of the future, for the good news could not be told without it—and they still responded with joy.

Come—Christ has arrived! The world may look the same, but everything has changed. Let us seek out Emmanuel! Let us, like Simeon and Anna, learn what it is to make our lives holy so that we might find God wherever God appears, no matter how unexpected; and let us learn, no matter how hard the world might seem, to be courageous enough to face the dark, and, despite everything, to respond to Christ's light with brazen and unapologetic joy.