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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, December 17, 2017
3rd Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B

Primary Text: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8; 19-28

Sermon Title: *“Live Lives of Continual Joy, Prayer, and Thanksgiving”*

Theme

“Rejoice always,” begins the reading from First Thessalonians. Isaiah and the psalmist make clear that God is turning our mourning into laughter and shouts of joy. “All God’s children got a robe,” go the words of the spiritual. It is not so much a stately, formal, pressed outfit as it is a set of party clothes, clothes that make us feel happy just to put on. We receive that robe in baptism, and in worship we gather for a foretaste of God’s party.

Text

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” ²¹And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” ²²Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³He said,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ”
as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” ²⁶John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Sermon

OK, I told you I was going to ask you. How many of you are at Peace, without Spot or Blemish?

Its JB and not JC again for the second week in a row. Did you notice that? The Gospel Reading is more narrative about John the Baptizer and Jesus Christ is not even mentioned!

You know I started this Advent season by telling you that I was determined to make it positive in spite of the Gospel Readings. And good news can be found in the other two readings and I will argue, in the Gospel Reading too. Hang in there with me.

As I mentioned in the last two Advent sermons, the First Readings have come from the OT prophet Isaiah. Isaiah's ministry was from the 8th Century BCE, a long time before John showed up on Jordan's banks. He was the mouthpiece of God when they needed it the most. They had been under the harsh rule of one oppressor after another for generations. They were slaves that lived in foreign lands. For the most part they had lost their unique identity as a people; their religious practices, their traditions and customs. And yet, through the prophet Isaiah, God gave them beautiful words of encouragement.

The first four verses of our First Reading are some of the most beloved of the OT. They are often quoted in Christmas cards.

¹The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed 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;
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,

And so on. This is all good news, especially if we are ones who are suffering.

However, in our American culture, and especially in this middle-class congregation, there are few of us who are suffering from much. Oh now, forgive me, we have

several who have lost a significant loved one in the last year or two. Your grief and pain is acute, I know. There are a few who are poor who continue to struggle to get by. I don't mean to invalidate your situation. But by and large, we live in this great country of opportunity. We are not anyone's slave, we are not experiencing oppression, we are not going hungry and have access to clothing and shelter.

But there are those who do not have enough, both in our community and around the world and so the prophet's message is still valid even for today. When we pray our prayers, before we ask God for anything, we should praise and thank God for the blessings we have already received. And then, along with all the things we ask God for in our lives, we should never forget that there are others in the world at this very moment who are experiencing everything Isaiah mentioned and more.

Right now wild fires are still raging in southern California. These fires are indiscriminate and will disrupt the lives of the rich and famous who can afford to rebuild, and thousands of others who cannot who have or will lose everything.

Right now there are areas of the world that are at war or on the brink of war. And as is almost always the case, it will be the poor, the weak, the widow, the orphan who will become the refugees; those of ethnicities that are on the wrong side of power that will pay the worst price.

Right now the United Nations is warning that the world is facing its worst humanitarian crisis since the end of World War II, with more than 20 million people facing starvation and famine in four countries; Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. Yet we hardly hear of it over all the sexual misconduct news we get.

For the most part we have First World problems. But when held up to the lens of the rest of the world, we often fail to realize how good we have it. Again, I do not mean to minimize what some of you may be experiencing, I am just trying to add perspective. And to remind us that we should pray for these situations and their needs too. And ask God to bring the hope and promise of Isaiah to these people too. There is this meme going around the internet, here it is. "If your prayers were answered today, would the world be changed, or just your life?" It's a profound question isn't it?

The apostle Paul is not always the one we expect to be the beam of sunshine when we gather for worship, but he is today. In the Second Reading from 1 Thessalonians, Paul reminds us to

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you

Paul wrote these words as words of encouragement and a reminder to the Thessalonians of their blessed life. The Thessalonians were converts to Christianity and maybe thought that faith in Christ meant that everything was going to be great as a result. Today we have a name for that, we call it *prosperity theology* and it is still popular among the mega churches. In a nutshell, it is this idea that if we just have faith, enough faith, everything is going to get better; a better job, better kids, better marriage, etc.

Some of the Christian Thessalonians died (no surprise to us, right?) and that was a concern to those who remained. What could this mean? Again, this is 2000 years ago. There was no Bible, no well-formed Christian theology. In this letter Paul was countering that prosperity theology with a theology of the cross that we Lutherans embrace, that teaches that we do not worship a God who is a lucky charm that fixes all our problems, but one revealed in the incarnation, the coming down in the form of Jesus Christ, the son of God, and the offering up the same in the crucifixion, the final perfect sacrifice and solution to the problem of human sin.

And so he wrote, in spite of whatever situation we may find ourselves in, “¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” For if we dwell on everything wrong in our lives, we lose sight of the blessings we have been given. And if our prayer lives are focused only on ourselves we won’t be able to see that God is constantly answering prayers of people around the world. And if we give of ourselves, by the sharing the blessings we have received and lifting up others in our prayers we actually end up feeding the Spirit of God within us.

Now, having heard from Isaiah and Paul, perhaps we can hear the message of John the Baptizer with a different attitude.

John the Baptizer was very clear about who he was and who he was not. He was the sentinel, the harbinger, the forerunner of the one who is to come after him, the Messiah of God who would make all what I just spoke of come to pass.

Though he is not named in this passage, and theologians still wonder whether John even knew who this “one” was, we know that Jesus Christ is the one about whom Isaiah and John preached, and in whom Paul put his trust.

Because you are hearing my voice, there is a strong likelihood that you too put your trust in Jesus Christ ... today. Because for most of us, everything is pretty good. But if you are one of those who struggle with loss or not having enough, or you have come to the conclusion that God isn't listening to your prayers, then maybe you just came because you have more hope in Jesus Christ than trust. Whatever your life situation, I want you to know, you've made the right choice. Because Jesus Christ is the only one who sits at God's right hand in glory and intercedes for us.

There is a grand and glorious outcome to the story of faith. An outcome that is well beyond what the Israelites and the Thessalonians and even we can imagine. Be patient. This present reality, this present age is not all there is.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

In the meantime, we are to live lives of continual joy for the hope that comes only through the LORD Jesus Christ, pray without ceasing for our own situations and also for situations around the world, and give thanks to God for all his blessing, both now and in the age to come.

This is my Raisin' the Bar Challenge for you this week. And it is good news!

Prayer

Lord God and Father of us all, we give you thanks and praise for the love you have shown us throughout human history. You bless us beyond our knowledge and we thank you for that. As we approach the celebration of your greatest act of love, the giving of your son Jesus Christ, give us joyful words and thoughts and actions, thankful hearts, and concern for others, . Amen