

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent

"They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isa 35:10).

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Today
is the Sunday of Joy... And why not?

The tree is up, the lights are twinkling,
the
Lord is providing His gifts in abundance -
gifts
we should take a moment to think about...

As I
sat down to write this sermon, I did so with the fresh vision of children
playing together yesterday morning in the communion of this church, coloring
nativity scenes on the floor of the narthex,
decorating the tree and drinking hot chocolate,
making music,
singing together, even doing a little dance to the Charlie Brown Christmas
music... These truly are the gifts of God.

While
the children were rejoicing in the gifts of childhood, their parents were
decorating
this tree together.

Others came and

brought egg and sausage biscuits, served cookies and chocolate,
and sipped eggnog
while the music of the season enveloped us from every part of the building.

These,
too, are the gifts of God.

Then
came the news of that bad lab result after one of you had worked so hard to get
your illness under control.

My daughter then
called to ask whether I thought her baby had who just fallen off the mattress
onto the floor might have a concussion.

Soon after, as we
used one of the funnels my dad had built to water Christmas trees,

I thought about his
coffin sitting right here (point to aisle) -

right in the same
place as that little-bitty casket of the 8-day old infant we buried about this
time last year.

And it
occurred to me, these losses, these trials are also gifts from God!

Now I
know this puzzles many people, but you know the background, right?

You know that the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23) -
everlasting death -

a death of unending
weeping and gnashing of teeth in the utter darkness that is so terrible, we
cannot begin to imagine it.

What's
worse, like a deadly cancer that spreads without symptoms until it's too late

to be saved,

we would have no
signs or symptoms of the horrific future that awaits us unless God *gave*
us signs and symptoms of our condition.

This is
why God *gives* us pain.

This is why God *gives* us toil.

This is why God *gives*
us, even *gifts* us with physical death and all the sorrows and
afflictions that come with the curse.

If you
read your Treasury of Daily Prayer yesterday, you heard these words from
Isaiah: "The LORD give[s] you the bread of adversity and the water of
affliction..." (Isa 30:20).

GOD does that, that
you may know your eternal peril and turn to Him for the forgiveness, life, and
salvation He sacrificed His Son to give.

Of
course, pain and affliction don't feel like gifts, do they?

I mean, hot chocolate
and glad tidings may feel like heaven on earth, but chemotherapy?

The
death of those we love?

The endless toil and
trouble and trials and heartaches that mark our lives in this fallen world?

These
feel more like hell, right?

And
there's a reason for that!

You

see, the trials and afflictions come from God, but hell on earth comes from the devil.

For it is the devil

who focuses our attention inward on ourselves and frustrates us with our helplessness and inability to fix things.

It is

the devil who intensifies the fear and anger within us when we can't seem to overcome the pain and problems on our own.

It is the devil who

turns us away from God and toward the world for help;

to princes who

cannot save and to idols and technology that remain lifeless, leaving us lifeless in their wake.

This is

why we hear the call to "Be strong and fear not!" (Isa 35:4) as a challenge to raise ourselves up by our own bootstraps -

to man-up and take the bull by the horns -

to "just believe,"

"just have hope," "just push through the suffering until that "better day" comes that everyone keeps promising.

Well

guess what? "Being strong and fearing not" is NOT something you do...

It is something you *receive*

from your Lord Jesus Christ when you go to Him—

which

is exactly where John the Baptist points us this morning.

In our

Gospel reading today, John is in a world of hurt.

He was chained in a dungeon, surrounded by Herod's henchmen,
waiting
to be put to death.

And
while he may have been a faithful prophet and perhaps even the greatest man
ever born of a woman, by now his hands were weak, his knees were shaking,
and the devil was working overtime to stir up his doubts and
fears.

Now, as
I said, this trial, this testing, this imprisonment was given to John by God,
right?

But the questions, the doubts, the fears all came courtesy of
the devil:

"Did
God really say...?"

As St.
John sat shackled in that darkness, the devil may well have asked, "Did God *really*
say, 'I will come with vengeance... I will come and save you' (Isa 35:4)?"

Did God *really*
say, 'I will set the prisoners free, open the eyes of the blind, and bring the
wicked to ruin' (Psa 146:7-9)?"

Is this Jesus really
the One who was to come and do all these things for you?"

In the
same way, the devil comes to us in the prison of this fallen world.

As we lose our health
and loved ones, face our own approaching deaths, and sit in the ash heap of our
sin scratching our scabs,
the devil asks, "Did

God really say, 'You shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away' (Isa 35:10)?"

How are
we to deal with these questions?

Where *will* we
find the strength to endure these miseries without fear and doubt?

"From
where *does* our help come?"

The
answer is given by St. John who points to the source of our deliverance:

For in
the midst of his own doubts and terrors;

in the midst of his own struggles against the powers of death
and hell,

John turned to
Christ Himself, to the Word made flesh who *gave* him strength to endure.

As the
devil hurled his flaming darts and accusations and doubts,

John sent to Jesus with that great Advent question,

"Are
you the One who is to come" (Matt 11:3)?

To
which Jesus answers a resounding yes that actually GIVES him the strength to
carry on,

that actually GIVES the endurance that produces hope (Rom
5:3-4),

that actually GIVES
the gladness and joy by which sorrow and sighing flee away.

For the
Lord had promised that on the day of His deliverance, “the eyes of the blind
would be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, and the lame man would leap
like a deer” (Isa 35:5-6).

And now, Jesus has fulfilled all these things (Matt 11:5)!
How?

By
His Word!

When
Jesus wants something done, He speaks it:

He says to the blind man, “See!” and the blind man sees.

To
the deaf He says, “Hear!” and the deaf hear.

To the man born lame
He says, “Walk!” and the lame man walks.

To you
who live in weakness under the attack of the devil, He says, “Be strong!” and
you are *made* strong!

For in the same way He says, “Be forgiven!” and you *are*
forgiven,

His
Word DOES what it says –

which is why the
command to “be strong” should never point to your own strength to overcome the
devil and all your fears, pains, and doubts,

but always and only
to the one who *casts* out your demons, who *raises* you up,

who *gives* you
the strength to endure every trial and test by His gracious Word of promise.

Jesus'

promise to you and His faithfulness IS the source of your gladness and joy in every circumstance of your life - *especially* the bad ones!

Therefore,

when God gives you His trials and tests -

when the painful

ordeals and challenges arise that show you your sin and your utter helplessness to help yourself, acknowledge it! Confess it!

Then

turn from yourself and repent!

Turn

away from your sin, away from your idols, away from your princes, and above all, away from the devil and his lies,

and turn back to

Christ whose Word *gives* you strength and *delivers* you to everlasting joy.

For He

who gives you that water of affliction has died for you to give you the water of life.

He who gives you the

bread of adversity has died for you to give you the Bread of Life that rescues you from sin, death, and the devil.

When

the devil tries to create guilt or doubts in the midst of your pain, remember your baptism -

Make the sign of the

cross and cast that demon straight back to hell where he belongs...He has no authority over you!

As you continue your

journey through the dark prison of this fallen world, turn always to the Word

who gives you strength for the journey.

Drink

deeply from the Cup of Promise which He has poured out for you –

Take and eat... the

very Bread of Life who bestows on YOU gladness and everlasting joy.

In

the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Pastor Holowach

Sermon Text: Matthew

11:2-15