

Prayer of the Day:

Hear our prayers, Lord Jesus Christ, and come with the good news of deliverance. Drive the darkness from our hearts and fill us with your light; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit one God now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. Alleluia. (Matthew 11:10b cf. NIV)

Sermon Text:

Gaudete! That's the word given to this Sunday in the church year. It means "rejoice!" in the Latin language. But I wonder do you feel like rejoicing in our world today? Maybe I just had a rough week but it seems like the light grows dimmer and dimmer, and no I'm not talking about the fact that the sun seems to rise a bit later and set a bit earlier these

days. No, I'm talking about the continued and visceral rifts in the politics of our nation. A growing immorality that seems to be pulling the modern world back into the days of paganism and perversion. Wars that have killed thousands and which linger on causing bloodshed and hunger, not to mention the unmentionable atrocities that are paraded before our eyes and assault our ears. Human trafficking and epidemics not only of sickness and disease but drugs and every form of immorality plague not only our nation but an entire globe. No, the world seems as if it can't spin into the abyss of hell fast enough these days, and then ... Gaudete! Rejoice!

Ah, but this is not some tone-deaf, well wish from a god who doesn't care about us or have any understanding of what we are going through. No far from it. Today in the words of the prophet Isaiah, God says "Gaudete", well technical "גָּדְלוּ", "Rejoice!" but as he speaks through Isaiah, He also gives us a reason to do it! But first, it has to get just a little bit darker.

In the book of Isaiah, God had given His people plenty of reason to do the opposite of rejoice. God had proclaimed that Jerusalem would fall. He said to the City of David, *Brought low, you will speak from the ground; your speech will mumble out of the dust. Your voice will come ghostlike from the earth; out of the dust your speech will whisper* (Isaiah 29:3). To the women of Jerusalem he had announced, *The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever, the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks,...* (Isaiah 32:14). The Lord even named the country that would bring this disaster as Isaiah spoke to Hezekiah, *Hear the word of the LORD Almighty: ⁶ The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD* (Isaiah 39:5,6).

Lesson: Isaiah 61:1-3,10,11

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor...¹⁰ 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. — NIV

As Israel digested this impending destruction, they also understood where the blame rested. In the opening sentences of Isaiah, God makes it crystal clear, *Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."* Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him (Isaiah 1:2-4). Israel's sin had done this. The results would be captivity and destruction at the hands of an invading country. It would mean the purging of the people of God. It would mean pain, even death.

Today, we may not tremble at the thought of impending captivity at the hands of an invading army. But the captivity of sin is every bit as damaging. The apostle Paul draws it out for us as he speaks to the Romans, *So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin* (Romans 7:25). What he is saying is that while the new man in each of us wants to keep the law of God there is also another force at work within us, the Old Adam and all it wants is to break that law.

This captivity of the sinful nature to the will and desire to sin is something we all know. Again, Holy Scripture is clear. *"What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one"* (Romans 3:9-12)." As we look at all this scripture this morning there is only one conclusion to be drawn, our sinful natures have earned for us a dark, dank prison cell in the eternal captivity of hell.

However, God announces release from captivity. While Isaiah's primary job was to inspire repentance in the hearts of the Israelites as the Holy Spirit worked through the fierce and often stern teaching of the Law, Isaiah also repeatedly preaches beautiful Gospel. He reminds the people that their captivity in Babylon will have an end and that Israel will be rebuilt. The prophet announces freedom and deliverance and even the adorning of God's people once again.

God even explains how all this will happen. It will not occur because of the goodness of the people or any quality within them that has earned or deserved it. It will occur because God himself will take action. Notice how Isaiah repeatedly stresses that God will do this, has done it, through His power for His people.

Now survey the mountaintops of prophecy, as one peeks over the next and we see another even greater fulfillment of these words. Not only would Israel be freed politically, God's people would be freed from sin. How does this happen? It happens the same way that Israel was freed from captivity in Babylon, through the working of God and His mighty power.

Take another look at the lesson and ask "who is the 'me' referred to?" Our first response is "Isaiah" but take a second look. Who did the Lord anoint with the Holy Spirit to proclaim peace and deliverance? Jesus Christ stood in the Jordan and as John baptized Him the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and the Father spoke from heaven. Jesus offers freedom from captivity as His blood, anointed by the Spirit and praised by the Father drips from thorns and nails on the cross. His death destroys death, removes the guilt of sin and forever defeats the Devil.

God designed a word for this work of our Savior. He calls it grace, undeserved love. God reaches out and gives us that very thing which we could have never earned or deserved. He grants us deliverance as He sends His Son into this world that our sins might be forgiven. He spills His

blood so that our captivity may end. And while we marvel over the fact that this underserved love of God has been showered down upon us there is another word at work today as well, mercy.

Perhaps you are thinking to yourself as we are discussing all this, “Well it’s great that God showers us with love when He should shower us with hate but let me tell you I’m not feeling so loved right now.” Imagine the hearts of people like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as they were carted off into captivity. They had heard the promise of God. They had believed the promise of God. They knew that God loved them, forgave them for their sin and still called them His own. But that didn’t change the heartache did it?

Imagine the agony of watching your church, house, and country completely leveled, not only watching it but knowing that it was your sin that made it happen. Despair, mourning, grief those are all good words to describe the hearts that were broken to pieces at the sight. This was deserved and while Messiah promised to relieve them from the guilt of sin, the consequences were happening right now and it would be hard to live through.

Does this sound familiar? The world collapses around our ears. We labor day in and day out. We mourn over the loss of loved ones. Our hearts ache as relationships fall apart. Death, pain, labor, hardship, while Christ has paid for its cause with His blood promising that it no longer earns eternal punishment, we still face the consequences of sin. When times are tough and Christmases are tight, it doesn’t always seem like I’m so forgiven.

Isaiah, inspired by God offers words of comfort for the people of Israel. He promises deliverance once more. God looks into the aching emotions of His people and promises relief. Broken hearts will be mended. Despair will give way to praise. The captivity will end. God doesn’t just take on the guilt He promises to remove the consequences one day as well.

God could have justified many other, lesser actions. He could have said I’ll release you from captivity and that alone is more than you deserve. Instead, He looks to His people and promises that He will restore them in the land that He previously destroyed. He would not free them to hardship and misery, He would carry His people, moving the heart of Cyrus to support the rebuilding of Jerusalem and establish His people once more.

These words don’t just speak to Israel however, they also speak to us. Yes, we live in a world overrun by sin. Everywhere we turn we look at its consequences. There are times when we feel more like prisoners than people freed by the blood of Christ, even times when we might not feel like we are loved and forgiven.

But it’s in these times that the mercy of God leads us to rejoice. We remember His grace as He sends His Son to pay for our sin and we remember that He has not treated us as our sins deserve. Instead, in true mercy He doesn’t just let us off with a lesser sentence, He treats us as if we are righteous. He places the white robe of Christ upon us. He gives us His perfection. God not only promises that the guilt of sin is gone but he gives us the crown of victory placing the prize of heaven in our hands. This knowledge allows us to look to the manger with hope knowing that while this world holds heartache, Christ brings comfort and peace. Through Him, we wait for a time when God promises not only to end sin and its dread consequences forever but He will do it even as He gives us the joy of heaven.

Yes, we may have bad days, weeks, or even years. At times, the light seems dim and the darkness would appear to have all but won. But Christ has done all the work in our place. As we stand longing to experience perfection. Soon, soon, we will rejoice at in the truth of the first coming of Christ into this world and with it, the assurance that the second coming brings the fulfillment of the first. Clothed in Christ’s righteousness, washed clean by His blood, we have something to wait for. Dare I say it, Yes! We have **A REASON TO REJOICE!** Amen.