

At this time of the year, there is a lot of talk about helping those less fortunate so that they may have Christmas, just like the rest of us. So we have programs such as “Toys for Tots,” which provide toys for those children who might not receive toys for Christmas. Radio and television stations seek to grant wishes for people who cannot afford them for themselves. Our own congregation is also gathering an offering to help some at Christmas. The way that you open your hearts with your generosity shows that you have taken to heart the Lord’s command to show love and concern for our fellow man. Yet, what a lousy Christmas these people will have if these few earthly blessings are the only joy and happiness which they find at this time of the year! What a lousy Christmas we will have if our only joy and happiness is going to be found wrapped in colored paper under the Christmas tree, or in the family gatherings during the holiday! Even if we receive absolutely no gifts this season, even if we cannot have a family get together, even if it seems that the whole world is against us at this time of the year, we would still be able to celebrate Christmas, and to have our hearts filled with real joy and peace. That is the sentiment which Isaiah expresses in the Word of God which is before us this morning. He stated, I DELIGHT GREATLY IN THE LORD. This joy comes because 1) Jesus brings us true freedom and happiness, and 2) Jesus promises us an eternal inheritance.

In our very materialistic age, we also tend to get wrapped up in the outward trappings of this season. We often tie the joy and happiness of this season to the gifts and “things” of this time of the year. And when we do that, we will find ourselves not being truly satisfied with what we receive, or wishing that we would have received even more. If we have the privilege of getting together with family, then maybe we will wish that everyone would have gotten along better with each other, or that everyone would have been able to have been there for the gathering. If we receive gifts, we may be disappointed that we did not get the one gift which we really wished we would have received. In our disillusionment, then maybe we will also no longer feel the feelings which we want to have at this time of the year. Like many others around us, we can get caught in the trap of celebrating Christmas in this way.

But if we really want to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we need to listen to the words of John the Baptist. His message was to call us to repent. To repent of something means, first of all, that we recognize that we have done something wrong. We have not lived a life of which we can proudly stand before our heavenly Father. In other words, we have sinned — yes, even in the way that we celebrate the coming of His Son to be our Savior. We recognize that we are unable to change the fact that we have sinned. If I were to forget my wife’s birthday, there is nothing that I can do to change that — the deed is done. But I can be sorry that I did it, and ask her to forgive me for it. That is exactly what John the Baptist is asking each one of us to do. He wants us to recognize our sin, and go to our Savior asking Him to forgive us for those sins. John the Baptist’s work, even upon our hearts today, is to get us to realize how great our load of sin really is, and that we are brokenhearted knowing that we are captive to sin, unable ever to do anything as perfectly as He wants us to do it.

But instead of letting us drown in tears of sorrow, John immediately points our eyes to the Savior Who washes those sins all away. Isaiah prophesied this with these words from this coming Savior, *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 for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.* (1-2) Jesus quoted these words and said that they were speaking of Him and the work which He came to this world to do for us. He does not want us to remain in the despair of our sins, for He has come to heal our broken hearts and announce the freedom which He has gained for us. God is no longer angry with us, threatening to punish us for our sins. Jesus has taken care of all of that, and now we get to experience God’s perfect love and blessings.

This all came about because Jesus entered into this world. When He came as a baby, He did it as our Substitute. He lived a perfect life for you and me, and He died in our place so that He would accomplish God’s plan to save each one of us for Himself. This Christmas season, we are reminded once again that God had not forgotten His promises of love and forgiveness. That little child, lying in a manger, produces

great joy and happiness in our hearts because He came to bring us freedom from all of our sins. The message of His birth is what brings about the joy and happiness that is to fill our hearts this holiday season.

We truly have a reason to say to each other, “Merry Christmas!” We love to sing the song, “Joy to the World.” This all reflects the joy of salvation which has been given to us through the birth of our Savior. We have been privileged to experience this joy that is ours through the forgiveness of all of our sins. Our Savior has been born, and that is the reason we celebrate this season with such joy and happiness. God’s love for us is what causes this joy to fill our hearts. And that joy is ours no matter what our holiday gatherings may be like, or what gifts may be waiting for us under that Christmas tree. Certainly we will be saying with Isaiah, I delight greatly in the Lord.

But let us not confine that joy only to these few weeks in December each year. That joy of salvation, along with the blessings which are ours through the birth of our Savior, are to follow us throughout the whole year. Christmas is not to be for us just a celebration of something which has happened long ago in a distant land. Christmas is something which has happened for us, and continues to happen for us every day of our lives. We experience God’s love and forgiveness, which first took visible form when He was laid in that manger in Bethlehem. The garments of salvation which He came to this world to win for us, are clothes which we wear every day of our lives. Each and every day, as we come before Him in prayer, we confess that we have sinned against Him in thoughts, words, and actions. Then, as we hear Him announce to us once again that our sins are forgiven, we cannot contain ourselves as we break out into a song of joy and praise. We have done just that earlier in our worship service. We joined together in confessing our sins. Then, as your pastor, I had the privilege of announcing to you that Jesus has washed away each and every one of your sins. Having heard that announcement, we joined our voices together in a song of praise to the One Who has blessed us in this way.

This forgiveness remains with us throughout our life here on this earth, and even continues when we are taken from this world, to live with our Savior in the mansions of heaven. One day, either when He calls us to our eternal rest, or when He returns again on the last day, we shall be taken from this world, filled with its pains and sorrows, and we will be privileged to live in His presence forever.

So especially at this time of the year, we are reminded of our Savior’s love and forgiveness as we prepare ourselves to celebrate His birth once again. Even the hymns which we sing are filled with sounds of joy that spring from hearts that know that their sins are forgiven. Those joyous Christmas songs are even piped through stores as you shop, because everyone loves the joy and happiness of which they speak. But it is only when we recognize that the reason that they speak of joy and happiness is because that little child whose birth we are celebrating is really OUR Savior! The blessings of this season do not come wrapped in colored paper under our Christmas tree — it comes wrapped in strips of cloth and is lying in a manger.

Certainly we will want to use the gifts which our Lord has given to us to help those who are less fortunate than we are, but let us not ever get the idea that by giving them a present, or even by ourselves receiving a present, that they are now experiencing Christmas. The real gift and the real joy of this season lies with the birth of our Savior. May we always say with Isaiah, I rejoiced greatly in the Lord!