

“Christ Brings Joy”
Isaiah 40:1-11
Wednesday, December 10th, 2014
Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine
Pastor Al Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Joy is an awesome experience and one which many spend their lives pursuing. It is “a direct feeling or better self-perception, as self-being in self-transport [that] strains beyond itself.” (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume IX, 359) Lewis offers valuable elaboration: “All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still ‘about to be.’” (Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 78) Lewis shared about what he learned in his own life: “Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring. And that object, quite clearly, was no state of my own mind or body at all.” (Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 220) Lewis continued: “And that is why we experience Joy: we yearn, rightly, for that unity which we can never reach *except by ceasing to be the separate phenomenal beings called ‘we.’*” (Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 221-222)

And this is why joy eludes us. We poor sinners are stuck on ourselves. Lewis quoted George MacDonald: “The one principle of hell is – ‘I am my own.’” (Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 212) And Lewis discovered through the Law of God that he was this way. As he looked within himself: “there I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion.” (Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 226) But in this same book Lewis leads us to the basis of his conversion from atheism to theism and finally to Christianity.

The Christian faith took him outside of himself and until he got the Gospel, religious life had only been about aiming for a better state of mind. He realized two basic errors in his approach to faith: “The first was made at the very moment when I formulated the complaint that the ‘old thrill’ was becoming rarer and rarer. For by that complaint I smuggled in the assumption that what I wanted was a ‘thrill,’ a state of my own mind. And there lies the deadly error. Only when your whole attention and desire are fixed on something else – whether a distant mountain, or the past, or the gods of Asgard – does the ‘thrill’ arise. It is a by-product. Its very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer. If by any perverse askesis [strict self-discipline] or the use of any drug it could be produced from within, it would at once be seen to be of no value. For take away the object, and what, after all, would be left? – a whirl of images, a fluttering sensation in the diaphragm, a momentary abstraction. And who could want that? This, I say, is the first and deadly error, which appears on every level of life and is equally deadly on all, turning religion into a self-caressing luxury and love into auto-eroticism. And the second error is, having thus falsely made a state of mind your aim, to attempt to produce it.” (Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 168)

And this is our great problem. We are bent inwards. We want joy to be something we keep inside ourselves. It is something we want to produce and manage; it is something we want to manufacture and grow. But we can’t since as dying sinners we ourselves are fading away. What can we do? Isaiah is clear about how serious our problem is: “All flesh is like grass, and all its beauty (or “consistency” [Concordia Journal, Fall 2011, volume 37, number 4, 306]) is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades.” (Isaiah 40:6b-8a)

But we're stubborn people and in sin we resist facing the truth. Our Old Testament reading is alongside the Gospel we heard last Sunday from Mark 1: John the Baptist "was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey." (Mark 1:6) This man was not about trying to be joyful by clinging to the passing things of this world. I was cracking up when during last Sunday's children's message Dr. Mueller asked the kids about what they thought about eating grasshoppers. Not exactly an animal style double-double from In and Out! But is this to say that John the Baptist didn't know joy? He most certainly did! His mother bragged on him while he was still in the womb. Elizabeth said this to Mary: *"And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."* (Luke 1:44-45)

Oh John knew joy alright. The Holy Spirit revealed the secret to him: there is only ONE that brings lasting joy...there is one that you may always wait for and anticipate; and only one who always comes and brings pleasure...again, and again, and again, only One, just One, the-One-and-Only, the Alpha and the Omega, the Only Wise God whose blessing, provision, and lavish grace never runs out; never goes dry. Thus, it became as nothing to John not to invest too much on everything else. He was joyful precisely because he waited on the Lord. There could be no let down; no disappointment. Jesus – unlike everything else in the world – is the one thing you can depend on.

Handel knew this as he was inspired by Isaiah 40:1-11 to compose his great "Messiah." Excerpts from "Messiah" include "Comfort Ye," "Every Valley," and "And the Glory"...and of course, "Hallelujah"...being in the midst of praising God is the experience of joy. Bach also knew this as evidenced by his "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring."

These monumental musical witnesses of the Gospel teach us that it is in the lasting Savior alone that we know joy that awaits for Him and joy in His appearing and joy in the everlasting outpouring of His gifts to us. It is only because Christ is eternal; that He always comes and always blesses and then blesses some more that joy is sustained; that we continue to know surprise and amazement...it is because Christ is unending; again eternal; and making – perpetually – all things new. With Jesus you can't get old; only new and then once again, new and then later, become new again and again.

This knowing Christ who is Creator is the opposite of only knowing the passing things of this creation. So we considered John full of joy and wearing camel's hair and eating grasshoppers as his attention was upon Jesus like Handel's "Messiah," but what about Israel?

They had forgotten about the Lord and were trying to find their joy in their flesh; the things that fade away like grass. Here is a picture of what was going on in Israel before their exile into Babylon that is pretty much opposite of what you just heard about John the Baptist: "With one hand, she slips the ivory comb through her wavy black hair. With the other, she checks her progress in a polished bronze mirror. Setting aside the comb, she begins to darken her eyelids, using an alabaster wand to spread the black paint. A pendant for each ear; a ring for the nose. She slides one bangle after another over her wrist until she clinks musically with each movement. Over her head and neck, she lowers a delicate necklace, which suspends a small silver scroll, the gift of her father, a priest. Inside is scribed the benediction he pronounces over the people at the temple on Mount Zion, including the sacred name of Yahweh. As she rises to leave, she adds one more item: a second necklace, heavy with beads. At its center hangs an amulet in the figure of Bes, a troll-like Egyptian god of good

luck.” (a hypothetical description of Judah’s affluence, idolatry, and growing indifference to God’s Word as presented in the Lutheran Study Bible, 1084)

And people wonder about the relevance of God’s Word to our day and age! The scene is one that is over 2500 years old and yet how different is it really from our own time? We are consumed with the passing things, but these bring no lasting joy. To teach his people, the Lord permitted them to lose the passing things, Judea the great was overcome and the people were taken into exile. They had forgotten about God and it seemed as if God had forgotten about them, but that wasn’t true. In the midst of the hardship, Isaiah told a prophecy: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” (Isaiah 40:1-2)

This by the way must be one of the most comforting real reasons we have for our confidence: God promised His suffering people what He was going to do for them and then after some time of waiting (of joyful anticipation even in the midst of hardship), God did what He said He was going to do (historical fact). The Lord keeps His promises. He has proven this again and again. And He will for you too Christian! And for Israel what the Lord did was extraordinary: as much as Israel had sinned, had been hard-hearted, had rejected God, had acted as rebels, and as people condemned to hell; God wouldn’t have it. The Lord gave them back double for all her sins. What does this mean? It means that we sin, but God forgives and forgives again and again...we die, He raises up...we are without hope...He instills new hope...we struggle to believe, He grants faith...Paul said in Romans 5:20-21: *“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through the righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

Just as you think you’ve gone way, way too far in your sin and in your unbelief, the Lord comes back: your warfare is ended. Christ referred to that war on the cross: “It is finished!” And even now the spoils of that victory are yours. The Holy Spirit – the Comforter – makes known the Gospel to you and for you: your sin is pardoned. Not some of it, not most of it, *but all of it*. You may now know the comfort that even while you battle the constant desire to try to find joy in how you feel or your state of mind that the Lord has given to you His lasting life over and above everything else that withers and fades. And His life is given to you Christian through His Word and His Sacrament and these as Isaiah proclaims in chapter 40: “will stand forever.” (verse 8) That’s why the Word produces joy...it is always coming to you, always bringing Christ, always bringing His gifts...despite your sin; in spite of how you feel...and as a result, joy comes often as a surprise as real joy does. But that shouldn’t surprise us for “Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him...He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom...” (Isaiah 40:10a & 11a)

Let me conclude with a little Lewis and then top him with Paul: “But what, in conclusion, of Joy? for that, after all, is what the story has mainly been about. To tell you the truth, the subject has lost nearly all interest for me since I became a Christian...But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. While that other was in doubt, the pointer naturally loomed large in my thoughts. When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries ‘Look!’ The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not

stop and stare. They will encourage us and we shall be grateful to the authority that set them up. But we shall not stop and stare, or not much; not on this road, though their pillars are of silver and their lettering of gold. 'We would be at Jerusalem.' Not, of course, that I don't often catch myself stopping to stare at roadside objects of even less importance." (Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 238) But even at that we may also say with St. Paul: ⁸"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – ¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians, the third chapter) Let this always be from where our joy springs.