

“A Joyful Future”

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What are you most looking forward to about the Christmas season? What is your favorite part?

Turn to someone near you and answer that question.

So one of my favorite parts about this Christmas season is happening this afternoon. All three of my kids will be right here on this stage, each having a part in the Christmas pageant. It has been so sweet for them to learn the Christmas story and Christmas songs and I can't wait to see them. I wonder what your favorite part is. . Maybe it is a tradition like candlelighting or Christmas carols. Or maybe it is opening presents, seeing family, eating Christmas cookies, going to parties, maybe just sleeping in or being off work. We love all of these things. There are so many chances to celebrate. It can be a joyful time of the year. I hope it is for you.

Joy is going to be our theme this morning. The future, what God has in mind, is joy and we are going to come back to that again and again this morning. The future will be joyful.

But before we get to joy, if you will indulge me, I had a silly thought this week, what would this time of the year be like without Christmas? What if like in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, it was always winter, but never Christmas?

There would still be sleep and maybe time off. But there would mostly just be weeks of studying and tests, a bunch of end of the year paperwork, cold weather and darkness at 5pm. Actually instead of always winter and never Christmas, I think in Hickory we would say it always rains, but never snows. Cold rainy days are just sad. Imagine no cookies, no pageants, no presents, no *All I Want For Christmas Is You* by Mariah Carey. It would just be sad.

Thankfully we don't have to worry about that. Christmas has always been part of God's plan. This fall we have been studying through the Old Testament and looking for Jesus. And every week, we have seen that Jesus has always been the plan.

This week, we find Jesus in Isaiah 61. Isaiah 61 is an Old Testament prophecy and Pastor Amy this week had a helpful way of explaining it. She said, “Prophecy is that it's sort of like an onion. There are layers upon layers that you can keep peeling back one after the next, if you wanted to. Prophecy has layers too. In this case, there's a sense or a “layer” that's about the prophet Isaiah and what was happening in his life, and there's a layer about Jesus and what was happening in his life, and there's a layer about what God's going to do when Jesus returns. This passage has layers.

That being said, Isaiah 61 is clearly about Jesus and we know that because Jesus said, “Isaiah 61 is about me.” At the start of Jesus' ministry in Luke 4, we read this story:

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

*because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

You only get one chance to make a first impression and Jesus goes for it. The people of Israel had been waiting 500 years for these words to come pass. Jesus says, "Those ancient words are about me. The Spirit of God is on me. I am here to proclaim good news and to set the oppressed free. The time is now!" Get excited.

With that in mind, let's go back together 500 years earlier to Isaiah 61. First, the language of always winter, but never Christmas kind of describes the life of the audience of Isaiah 61. Things were bad and they just stayed bad. A quick history, the year was 536 BC and what was left of the family of Israel had just spent 50 years in exile in Babylon as punishment. 50 years earlier, the King of Judah decided to side with Egypt against Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar. When that rebellion failed, Babylon came, laid siege to Jerusalem, and after 2 and half years of starving the people of Israel, he broke the walls of the city, entered the city, killed most of the royal family and many of the cities inhabitants, stole all the gold he could find, and then burned what was left of Jerusalem and the temple to the ground. It was a wasteland.

Those who survived this siege were carried into exile and for 50 years they prayed for better days. They prayed for a chance to get back to Jerusalem, to celebrate again with their families the New Year, the Passover, and the Day of Atonement. They prayed prayers like Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. 2 There on the poplars we hung our harps, 3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

The older members of Israel made it their mission to keep the memory of Israel alive, and in their own words, Jerusalem was their highest joy. They just wanted to go home.

And then finally after 50 years, the people of Israel were allowed to go home. Imagine their delight! No more being servants to strangers in a foreign land. They get to go home and see for themselves the land promised to them by God. They were so excited.

But when they returned what they found there was nothing. They return to the land and the city they loved, that their grandparents and great-grandparents sang about, only to see with their own eyes that the temple of the Living God and the city of David looked like ground zero, everything was just ruins.

And it was to these people, the people who have had generations of trouble and now had more, God sent a message of joy. Isaiah 61:1

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,

because the Lord has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

First thing first, the one speaking here is the Messiah, the anointed King that is to come. Four times, Isaiah has described God's rescuer, who has been anointed by the Spirit, who will come as we talked about last week as a suffering servant.

Here again this week we hear from this servant and He has good news for the poor.

The word "poor" (a-na) here can mean financially poor, but it is also broader than that. This is a message for those who are lacking, the people who are bowed, who are bent with the burdens of life and the people of Israel certainly were.

If we pause for a second, Earlier, I said Christmas can be a joyful time of the year, but it is not only a joyful time, it can be a painful time for a number of reasons. Maybe chiefly, this season can be painful because of the people who will be missing from our family celebrations. Maybe that is because they have died, moved away, or relationships are strained. The weight of loss is a burden for us. This time of the year can be hard financially or because of the amount of work required of you. Family dynamics can be difficult. Christmas is a joyful time, but it can also leave us a-na. Bowed, poor, bent.

In our text, Israel is described as being poor, brokenhearted, captive, prisoners in darkness. Israel was wearing mourning clothes, covered in ashes (an outward sign of the internal anguish they were experiencing), and they were filled with a spirit of despair.

This language of a spirit of despair sticks out to me. It may be the weight we carry into this season has nothing to do with Christmas, but instead life is hard. Anxiety or worry or despair.

About 2 years ago, in a counseling session, I had this realization, "Joy is harder for me than it used to be." I am a pretty naturally joyful, positive person. On the optimistic-pessimistic continuum, or if you prefer, the optimistic-realistic spectrum, I still lean heavily optimistic. But joy is harder than it used to be. I have had too many bad days, too many bad things happen. Does that fit you at all? Is joy more or less difficult for you than it was 3 years ago?

We carry around the scars of living in a fallen world. Sadness and despair seem easier than they used to.

It is to people who live under the weight of these things that God has sent good news. And it is precisely because things have been so difficult that what comes next is such good news. Who needs good news if not those who have been living in a world of bad news?

And the good news is all that weighs Israel down will be healed and exchanged for something far better. Israel has a joyful future and they have a joyful future, because God is going to give that to them. God's servant will take what they have and exchange for something much better. There will be a great exchange. Here is what the suffering servant, here is what Jesus has been sent to do:

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

(Notice that God's rescuer will have good news and he will have the power to accomplish the good news. What I am doing this morning is announcing good news, but I didn't accomplish this. The anointed one has been given power in this case to pick up the pieces of a broken heart, put them back together, and wrapping them up so they can heal)

to proclaim freedom for the captives

(The word here freedom is the idea of liberty, meaning freedom won at cost. This is not the freedom to do whatever they want, but the hard won freedom to be who God made them to be.)

and release from darkness for the prisoners,

(Their prison had been exile and their sadness had been their darkness.)

2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor

(The year of the Lords' favor is a reference to the year of Jubilee from Lev. 25. This was a year-long celebration designed by God and given to the people of Israel as they entered the promised land centuries earlier. The year of Jubilee was a fresh start, economically, culturally, environmentally, and communally. The people and the land would rest for a whole year. All the slaves were set free and every debt was canceled. This was never actually practiced by Israel as far as we can tell but this says a lot about God and his love for the people and his creation.)

and the day of vengeance of our God,

(God will not allow evil to go on forever. That is very good news. One of our chief complaints against God throughout history is that he has let evil go on too long, well there will come a day when evil gets what is coming to it. Injustice will be punished. It has not gone unnoticed)

to comfort all who mourn,

(Listen to this beautiful exchange language)

to bestow on them a crown of beauty

instead of ashes,

the oil of joy

instead of mourning,

and a garment of praise

instead of a spirit of despair.

In those days, when someone was mourning, they would put on rough clothes and cover themselves with ashes as an outward sign of their inward grief. But instead, those who mourn will get a crown of victory and celebratory perfume, and party clothes. There is a good future.

They will be strong and alive like oak trees, like a new garden of eden and their lives will reflect the splendor of God. This is a beautiful exchange.

Not only that, but the ancient ruins and devastated places will be rebuilt. And they will no longer serve other nations, but a reversal will take place. The reversal is not that Israel will be in charge one day and

the nations will serve Israel. No, the reversal is better than that. Israel, God's people will fulfill their purpose in the world, to be his ambassadors, his priests to the nations. And do you know how priests were paid, how they had food to eat? They had a share of what was offered to God. Isaiah 61 says the nations will come to know God and the nations will offer their service and wealth to God, which will go to the care of God's priests. "You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast."

You will become who God made you to be and every nation will be included. This is great news.

The Servant of God goes on:

7 Instead of your shame

*you will receive a double portion,
and instead of disgrace*

*you will rejoice in your inheritance.
And so you will inherit a double portion in your land,
and everlasting joy will be yours.*

Instead of shame and disgrace, instead of feeling unwanted and rejected, you will have a reward. And then these words, "Everlasting joy will be yours."

Now again one of the strange parts of prophecy in the Old Testament is understanding who this applies to and when. Some of these things have happened for Israel, Jerusalem was rebuilt and a version of the temple was constructed. But there was still mourning and sadness in their day. In Jesus' day, He gave sight to the blind and his work on the cross has set us free from our slavery to sin. So this prophecy is for Israel in the time of Isaiah and their return from exile. This prophecy is true and fulfilled in Jesus and his work 2000 years ago. And this passage still looks ahead to a future that will be marked by joy. Everlasting joy will be the future for those who trust Jesus and His rescue.

Our future is a joyful one.

And to be clear this goes beyond good feelings or a therapeutic message, but in verse 8 it says

8 "For I, the Lord, love justice;

*I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.*

Jesus loves justice, he hates robbery and wrongdoing. Remember the day of the Lord's vengeance? God is interested in far more than just positive feelings. God loves justice and intends to put to right not just our outward circumstances but our inward sinful condition that leads us from joy. It is precisely God's commitment to justice that allows for a joyful future. It is not just that we will feel joy, joy being a pervasive sense of wellbeing. Jesus will come again and set everything right. Everything actually will be well, in the world, in my family, and in my own soul.

I love this idea, but it challenges me. To believe in a joyful future can be difficult. Remember, we have had too many bad days, been hurt too much. Joy is harder than it used to be. Not only that, I have, we

have distorted views of God. When you think of God, do you think of God as joyful? I think of God as powerful, right, holy, in control, and I have come to know Him as loving, but joyful?

Not really, that is stretch. But it is true. When the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5 is describing what life with the Spirit is like, He says, the fruit of the Spirit is love and then joy... When God is around, you can expect joy. God is the most joyful being in the universe.

One other challenge we have is our view of life with God. If we are not careful, we can come to think of life with God as boring or drudgery (Do I have to?). I remember growing up and someone saying that heaven was going to be one long worship service that never ends and thinking that would be really boring. But that is better than hell, so.... And I missed it. To believe that we will honestly enjoy heaven might take work for us.

Our future with God will be filled with everlasting joy. There is more we can say about this passage, but I want to end there, with this idea that our future with God is truly joyful and that it might take a little work for us to believe.

When we think about applying Isaiah 61 to our lives this week, I want to invite you to practice joy. Think of it as training for heaven, for your eternal good future. A few ideas about how to do that:

Pray for awe and wonder. Pastor Paul was telling me a story that when he first moved back to North Carolina, he would drive around Hickory and catch a glimpse of Grandfather Mountain or Table Rock and just think, "Wow, Thank you God we get to live here." But after 20+ years, it doesn't wow him anymore. Now the things that used to wow us have become normal to us, but in my experience, when I pray for awe and wonder, God has been faithful to give it. There is a great line in GK Chesterton's book *Orthodoxy* where he talks about how kids never get tired. They say, "Do it again." "Do it again." Until the grown ups are exhausted. Chesterton said that in this way, God is more like a child. He never gets tired of his creation, of us, but that we have sinned and grown old, and the Father is younger than us. Pray this week for awe and wonder.

Second, do what brings your heart deep gladness and do them with God. Spend time with other people, share a meal, serve, laugh, listen to music, dance, take walks in nature and invite God to go with you. What are you most looking forward to about Christmas? Invite God into those moments and in those moments of delight, say Thank you to God.

In honor of Pastor Paul, I want to close by quoting Lord of the Rings. Near the end of the long story, after Sam and Frodo complete their mission and destroy the ring, Sam and Frodo give in to their complete exhaustion and Sam loses consciousness, convinced he was going to die. And when he comes to instead of being dead, he wakes up to see Gandalf, who he knew was dead. And he is very confused. And then this,

At last he gasped: 'Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?'

'A great Shadow has departed,' said Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known.

But he himself burst into tears. Then, as a sweet rain will pass down a wind of spring and the sun will shine out the clearer, his tears ceased, and his laughter welled up, and laughing he sprang from his bed.

It had been so long, since he heard laughter, that just the sound of joy brought him to tears. It was like that for Israel and it may be like that for you. But that is why what is written in Isaiah 61 is called good news. The poor, the burdened, the brokenhearted, the mourning will be healed, put back together, and restored. Everything sad will come untrue. And in Jesus that has already started. One day we will be filled with everlasting joy in the presence of God. Our future is a joyful one.