

Sermon for January 1, 2017 – 1st Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 63:7-9 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: **Merry in God's Christmas Mercies.**

- 1) *For our own encouragement.*
- 2) *For the encouragement of others.*

⁷I will tell about the LORD's mercies, about the praises of the LORD, about all that the LORD has done for us, about his great goodness to the house of Israel, which he did for them according to his abundant compassion, and according to his great mercy. ⁸ He said, "Surely they are my people, sons who will not deal falsely," so he became their Savior. ⁹In all their anguish he had anguish, and the Angel of his Presence saved them. In his love and in his pity he himself redeemed them, and he took them up and carried them all the days of old.

Christmas is over and, after celebrating such a hyped-up holiday, it is easy to either feel down or depressed. Many of us said goodbye to relatives that we don't get to see all that often due to distance. Soon we'll have to take down the decorations and our children will be back to school. Even though the days are getting longer, it's still cold, dark and the worst of winter is yet to come.

It's easy to understand why the joy of the Christmas holidays fades for the world, but should it ever fade for the Christian? You see, we know the true meaning of the holidays: that a Savior from sin has been born for us, who is Christ the LORD! Christmas doesn't mark the end, but the beginning of our joy. What God began at Christmas ought to comfort us when we are depressed and console us in our sadness. It helps us meet fear and apprehension of the future with hope.

And so, during this emotional time of year, let us follow the example of our sermon text and **Merry in God's Christmas Mercies.** 1) *For our own encouragement.* 2) *For the encouragement of others.*

Part One: For our own encouragement

Isaiah writes: *⁷I will tell about the LORD's mercies, about the praises of the LORD, about all that the LORD has done for us, about his great goodness to the house of Israel, which he did for them according to his abundant compassion, and according to his great mercy.*

Even though Isaiah had prophesied about the LORD's judgement over Israel concerning her impenitent sin, he still had a reason to rejoice. And what reason was that? God's anger would not last forever. He would rescue and redeem his people – just as he did in the past. He would do this – not because Israel deserved it, but according to his abundant compassion and great mercy. Yes, dark times lay ahead for Israel but, reflecting on God's past faithfulness Isaiah could comfort himself with the LORD's promised mercy and deliverance.

Brothers and sisters in Christ – like the prophet Isaiah, we live in dark times. Many people are turning away from the LORD – refusing to heed his call to repent of their sins and be forgiven. Because of this, God’s judgment is coming. We don’t know when, but it is most certainly coming.

So, where does that leave us? Should we live in fear of the future – sad and depressed because of all the bad stuff that is happening in the world? Should we wonder whether the LORD is really in control, or if He will deliver us? Should we wonder whether the LORD is still holding our sins against us – even though we’ve repented of them?

No, rather we should do what Isaiah did and console ourselves with God’s past faithfulness and future promises. With Isaiah, we should all *tell about the LORD’s mercies, about the praises of the LORD, about all that the LORD has done for us.*

And to whom should we tell these things? First and foremost to ourselves! Why? So that we might grow in faith and learn to look to the LORD in hope. There’s no reason for us to be afraid. God will keep his promises. We can merry in all the mercies he shows us!

Before we go on, we should probably define what God’s “mercies” are. They are all the wonderful things he does for us out of love – whether it be providing all that we need for our body and life, or forgiving our sin so that we can live with him forever in heaven. God’s mercies are all the demonstrations of the love he has for us – the greatest of which occurred on Christmas, when he sent His only begotten Son into the world to be our Savior, *according to his abundant compassion.*

I want to pause here a moment and talk about the word translated in our sermon text as “compassion.” It’s related to the Hebrew word for “womb” and has the connotation of a deep love and a natural bond. Think about the natural maternal instinct a mother has for a child in the womb. Think about the love and prayers a mother offers up for her baby: how she willingly cares, comforts, and nurses her child after its born. This is the compassion the LORD has for his Church: a compassion that led him to don flesh and blood in the womb of Mary, so he could be born to win our righteousness, suffer and die for our forgiveness, and rise from the grave for our justification.

Our text continues with God saying: *“Surely they are my people, sons who will not deal falsely,” so he became their Savior.*

“Now wait a minute,” we might be thinking, “isn’t there a problem with this verse? Hasn’t everyone dealt falsely with God by the simple fact that we’re all sinners? Who, therefore, are the people described in this verse, when the Scriptures clearly say that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God?”

The people God is talking about here are believers – those who have repented, been washed clean from all sin through faith in the Gospel and sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism. They are the righteous ones belonging to God – not because of anything they have done, but all for his mercies sake.

Still, every believer knows that, in and of himself, he is far from faithful. Every believer is aware of the sin that lurks in his heart. If this is true, how can God say that we will not deal falsely? He can say it in view of Jesus. His righteousness covers our sin. In Christ, our unfaithfulness is forgiven. God sent his Son into the world for this very purpose: to save a people for himself who would be righteous and holy in His sight.

Isn't this wonderful? Our salvation is not dependent on what we do, but on God's decision to save. He wanted us to be His holy people, so he sent Jesus to save us from our sins. This is God's Christmas mercy in which we continue to be merry: Jesus was born on this earth to be our Savior so that, through faith in him, we might become his holy people, as the Scriptures say:

9In all their anguish he had anguish, and the Angel of his Presence saved them. In his love and in his pity he himself redeemed them, and he took them up and carried them all the days of old.

What a beautiful passage! When believers are in anguish, the LORD is in anguish as well. Our God truly feels for us. He doesn't take any pleasure in our suffering. He does not want us lost under the burden of our sins. This is why he was born on Christmas, died on Good Friday and rose from the grave on Easter morning. He did all these things to redeem us from the guilt of our sins, so that we might be freed from the eternal anguish we deserve because of them. And, as our Good Shepherd, he continues to rescue, save and lead us home to our promised land of heaven, just as he did for Israel of old.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: for many this time of year can be a depressing and fearful time. The high of the holidays is over. It is understandable why people might feel down and apprehensive of all the challenges and troubles the new year might bring. But there is a good remedy for this fear and depression. Continue to merry in the Christmas mercies God has shown us in Christ. Think about the faithful love and compassion God must have for us if he sent His own Son to be born as our Savior. And if the LORD *did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* (Romans 8:32 NIV84)

Yes, continue to merry in the mercies God has shown us, first of all for your own encouragement and joy, and then also that you might encourage others with the same joy in which you yourself have found comfort.

Part Two: For the encouragement of others.

You see, there are a lot of people who feel down on and after the holidays – so much so that we have coined terms to describe this condition: “Seasonal depression” and the “winter blues.” Sadly, many don't have the same comfort and remedy for their depression that we have. And why is that? For the simple reason that they do not know Christ. This gives us a wonderful opportunity to share the Gospel, which offers eternal hope.

St. Paul once wrote: *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* But, ¹⁴ *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?* (Romans

10:13-14 NIV84) The people of our world are in desperate need of a Savior. There are billions of people who are literally dying without hope because they don't know Christ. And they will never know about the hope the LORD offers them in Christ unless someone tells them.

And this is where you and I come in: God does not want our Christmas joy to end with the turning of the new year. No, he wants us to continue to merry in his Christmas mercy – not only for our own encouragement, but also for the encouragement of others: that they too might have to same hope we have.

And how exactly can we continue to merry in God's Christmas mercies? By joyfully telling our family, friends and neighbors of the great compassion God demonstrated for all people by sending his Son into the world.

Now, in order to get people to understand why this is such great and important news, we will probably have to use God's Law to show people their sins, so that they will understand why we all need a Savior in the first place. Just as a person may not take medicine until he's convinced that he is sick, so also people will not willingly receive the Gospel unless they first understand their need for it.

But once the Law does its work, what a wonderful privilege it is to be God's messengers – consoling and comforting repentant hearts with the message of the Savior.

And what a great message it is! God loves us so dearly that he took on human flesh and blood in order to save us from our sins. He lived the life of perfect obedience to God's law that we all failed to live so as to win the righteousness we need to stand before him. He took our sins upon himself and suffered on the cross the punishment we all deserved because of them. God did this because He loved us. Christ resurrection proves that our sins are forgiven. Through repentance and faith, we receive this forgiveness and are at peace with God. This is the Christmas mercy God wants us to merry in. This is the message with which he wants us to encourage each other.

Has the ending of the holiday season got you down, depressed, lonely or scared? Look back to Christmas and remember the mercy God showed you on that day: he sent you a Savior who not only forgave all your sins, but also promises to be with you through every step of your life – guiding and protecting you as the Good Shepherd that he is, until he brings you safely home to himself in heaven. Amen