

“The Third Sunday in Advent” December 17, 2017

**Our Savior’s Way
Worshiping Sundays 8:00, 9:30, & 11:00 AM
Pastor Bill Mann**

Are you ready for Christmas? Is your tree up yet? Maybe you heard about this Christmas tree. They put up in the lobby of the Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi a few years ago.

(Video: “Emirates Palace Christmas Tree Time Lapse”)

How much did you pay for your tree? The tree in the lobby of this Arab hotel is 43 feet tall and is worth a staggering \$11 million! It is decorated with gold and silver jewelry--precious stones—pearls and diamonds and rubies. \$11 million--that’s enough money to pay for a 60-year stay in a deluxe hotel at Disneyland. So what are you doing for Christmas? What will make your Christmas joyful? \$11 million—In Abu Dhabi, that’s what it costs to bring a little Christmas joy.

Today is “Joy Sunday.” The theme of joy runs all through the Scripture readings. The old Latin name for this Sunday is “Gaudate.” It’s the word that begins the introit for today—and it means “Rejoice!” Do you see the pink candle on the Advent Wreath? The theme of joy is the reason we light the pink candle, on today the Third Sunday in Advent.

If you listen, you can hear the theme of joy echoing from the words of the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 61:10—“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of

righteousness.” But this reading from Isaiah is not all joy. Isaiah 61 begins with a much darker theme—Isaiah writes--“The Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim 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, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort ALL WHO MOURN, and provide for THOSE WHO GRIEVE in Zion- 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.”

The poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, all who mourn, those who grieve, the despairing—Isaiah was writing 700 years before the birth of Jesus to a people living in exile. The people were far from home—prisoners in a foreign land. They had no reason to be joyful. So, how can you find joy in a joyless place? Isaiah's answer is this—even in the most joyless place the Spirit of the Lord is present. God is there.

I have a friend who suffers from severe, debilitating headaches. He has suffered from these headaches for eighteen long years. Modern medicine has been able to offer only temporary relief. How can he find joy through days of pain? This is his answer—“I know that God is with me even in the pain.”

I know a woman who lost her husband two years ago on December 22nd. Now these days before Christmas are filled with grief. I'll be looking for her tonight at 7:00 pm at the Candlelight Service of Remembrance. I know she'll be there. She is brokenhearted because of her loss. But she has Jesus in her heart. She is not alone. She rejoices in the hope of the resurrection and in her family and friends and a church community that surround her with the love and the comfort.

I know a young man who is held captive by hatred and is oppressed by anger. There are too many people like him. He is better when he takes his medication, but he doesn't like the way it makes his head feel. Even so, there are times when God's love and acceptance and forgiveness and grace break through into his life and he is set free. But it's an ongoing struggle. His hate and anger are strong and he occasionally returns to his emotional prison cell. I know that he has not been abandoned. His family still loves him. I still care about him and pray for him. And God's love and presence is always there for him.

Thousands of people have faced tragedies during this past year. There have been hurricanes and earthquakes, floods and tornadoes, fires and tragedies of many kinds. In all that upheaval and destruction and loss, God is present in words and actions. Hurting people experience God's love when we, God's people, live out that love—when you and I demonstrate God's love in what we do and what say to those who are hurting.

As I look at today's Old Testament Reading from Isaiah 61—it is one of the most beautiful passages of Scripture—totally worth committing to memory. But, I think our reading this morning stops too soon. The words at the beginning of Isaiah 62 are so important—"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness shines forth like the dawn, and her salvation like a blazing torch." This is the Good News! We can't keep quiet about it. The Messiah has come! Jesus is born! This is not a message we want to keep to ourselves! Today we can say with Isaiah, "I will not keep silent!"

This week my house has become "Christmas Present Central." UPS, Fedex, and the US Mail drop off packages every day. My three sons, who are now living in Lansing, Fredericksburg, and Purcellville are busy ordering things online. Christmas is going be at our house this year, so everything is getting delivered to my

door. The boxes are piling up. It's all very exciting. We're ready. The Christmas tree is standing in the window, the house is decorated, and everybody is supposed to meet at our house on Christmas Day. We're all working hard to make this a joyful Christmas. No expense has been spared.

But is it about how much money we spend or how hard we work to make Christmas happen? On December 18th, one week before Christmas, the government news agency in the United Arab Emirates carried a news story. The managers of the Emirates Palace Hotel admitted that they had "acted in bad taste." And they "regretted their decision to overload the tradition of decorating a tree for the holiday season." \$11 million was too much "Bling". Think about that. If a bunch of Arabs in Abu Dhabi can come to the realization that the real meaning of Christmas is not about the "Bling", is it possible that we, in the US, can come to that conclusion too? And if it's not about "Bling" or the tree or the gifts or the overblown holiday traditions, what is it about? Where can we find the true joy of Christmas? Isaiah nailed it, when he wrote these words almost 3,000 years ago (7:14)—"Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (which means God is with us). God is with us. This is what Christmas is all about. Jesus Christ God's Son was born into this world to be our Savior. God is with us. God is with you—no matter who you are, no matter what you are going through right now, no matter where on this earth you find yourself this Christmas. Immanuel, God is with you. And that's the real joy of Christmas!