

December 16, 2007  
Advent 3

*"Just Say Merry Christmas"*

---

**ISAIAH 35:1-10**

---

**T**he desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, <sup>2</sup> it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. <sup>3</sup> Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; <sup>4</sup> say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." <sup>5</sup> Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. <sup>6</sup> Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. <sup>7</sup> The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. <sup>8</sup> And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. <sup>9</sup> No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, <sup>10</sup> and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Can you remember the high school basketball game where one team tried to out shout the other team during the half time activities? In these days before Christmas we find ourselves in a similar shouting contest. On the one side is the group that says, "Happy Holidays." On the other side is the group that says, "Merry Christmas."

I have to admit that when someone says, "Happy Holidays" it is hard not to respond with a louder, more emphatic greeting, "Merry Christmas." The last thing I ever want to do is wish someone "Merry Christmas" with a belligerent, angry, I am better than you, tone of voice. We could tell a hundred stories of Grinches who try to steal Christmas such as the community leaders in Fort Collins, Colorado who banned the use of green and red lights on public buildings because it was too much like Christmas. Old Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens *A Christmas Carol* had these harsh words to say about those who wish each other "Merry Christmas!" "If I could work my will every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding."

The greatest challenges to having a merry Christmas are not all those people out there such as the Chumash Casino who use a new version of the song "We Wish You a Christmas" that says, "We Wish You a Happy Holiday." The greatest challenge is keeping the true joy or reason for celebrating Jesus' birth in our own hearts and homes and in our contacts with other people. Satan and his evil minions have already planned hundreds of ways to keep Christ out of your Christmas and steal the joy from your heart.

Let's just say Merry Christmas, but let's say it to ourselves first. This morning we want

to have the prophet Isaiah open our hearts and minds to the joy that is ours as we see more clearly the glory of God that comes to us in such great miracles as Jesus' birth and the glory that we share together as God's people marching forward to the place he has prepared for us.

### **What glory comes to us**

If it is true that a picture is worth a thousand words, then Isaiah has a great picture for us this morning to help us see the glory of the Lord coming to us.

"The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy." A few years ago when we had a lot of rain in California, some of the storms even reached into Death Valley. In the spring the dry barren desert was covered with flowers. How could I ever forget the hike we took near Figueroa Mountain, with the hillsides ablaze with flowers? Isaiah sees the desert bursting forth with green plants similar to the mountains of Lebanon, or the coastal regions of Carmel and the beautiful valley of Sharon. He says, "They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God."

You can certainly see God's glory in the desert flowers that bloom after the rain, or the stars that shine in the sky, or the amazingly complex human cell that you can observe under the lens of a microscope, or the beautiful birth of a little baby. As great as these displays of God's glory are, they pale in comparison to the glory that our eyes are privileged to see in a lowly manger in Bethlehem. John said of Jesus, the Word made flesh, "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Isaiah captured this joy in chapter 40 where it says, "You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You, who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" We want the awe and the joy the shepherds had on their faces when they first saw Jesus to be present in my life even more.

Oh, think of Jesus coming into our world as you hear these words of Isaiah. "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear, your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'" I think of the old Superman television episode where he takes a lump of coal, squeezes and turns it into a diamond. Look at the little hands of baby Jesus and see the power in those hands as he hangs on the cross to pay for your sin. He came with retribution and vengeance against the old evil foe who condemns us day and night before God's throne. But, the Revelation tells us, "They overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and the Word of the testimony." Fear grips me and fear grips you when we read the words of Romans 3, "There is no one righteous, not even one, there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.... Their throats are open graves and their tongues practice deceit.... Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood." God have mercy on me if I ever use these lips and this heart and this mind to wish someone "Merry Christmas" in a spiteful way because they have upset me with the generic and politically correct greeting "Happy Holidays."

I am nothing, but Jesus is everything. He came to pour out his wrath on sin and take

revenge. John the Baptist pictured him as burning the chaff with unquenchable fire. Jesus is a perfect and righteous Judge who knows every sin we ever committed and how much the cost was to pay for that sin. He took that shame and guilt and punishment on himself the way a sponge absorbs water. He then took the full revenge and payment and justice that was required. Isaiah 53 says that punishment for our peace was upon him. That's the beautiful message of the gospel that allows us to strengthen feeble hands and steady the knees that give way.

What glory we see in Jesus our King of kings and Lord of lords as we read further in these verses of Isaiah. "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, the mute tongue shout for joy." When Jesus came people who were blind from birth not only had their eyes opened but even recognized things they had never seen before. Deaf mutes who never heard a sound in their lives, not only heard sounds and recognized them, but they were able to speak. Lame legs that never walked could leap like a deer. When Michael Jordan was in his prime he had a vertical leap of 42 inches. Ever see a deer jump a six foot fence from a standing position?

Jesus changed the lives of the lame, the deaf and the blind. He has also changed your life and mine. These changes are so dramatic they are pictured as the desert gushing forth with water from the rocks, and sands turning into marshes. Where jackals once roamed there is grass, and reeds and papyrus and birds everywhere. Have you ever seen someone's life powerfully changed by the Word of God and the birth of Jesus? I have. You have. In fact look at the person next to you this morning. They are here in this worship service because they have taken to heart the miracle of Jesus birth. The words of Isaiah 9:6 have altered their lives. "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." Miracles are happening all the time as the Holy Spirit puts Christ into someone's Christmas and makes Jesus the reason for the season.

Some years ago, I visited an elderly man who lived in Atascadero in a senior living center. It was the Christmas season. On his door he had an old Christmas card with a piece of evergreen branch. On it were these words from John 10:10, "I have come that they might have life and have it to the full." In John 10 Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and gives his life for them. When Jesus comes into your life and makes the miracles of his birth, his death, and his resurrection real to you, he transforms your life. You have life to the full. You know that nothing will ever separate you from his life. You joyfully say "Merry Christmas" to yourself first and then others around you.

### **What glory we see in those around us**

We love being with fellow Christians during this time of year because we can say, "Merry Christmas" to them and they know what it means. We travel together down the road of life celebrating Jesus' first coming into our world and eagerly anticipating his return in glory. Listen to how Isaiah describes our journey down the road of life surrounded by the glory of those who believe what we believe about Jesus. "And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that way; wicked fools will not go about on it."

We walk together down the road of life sharing the joy of knowing that we are clean and holy, not because of any goodness in us, but only because of Jesus. He told us in John 15, "You are clean through the Word I have spoken to you." We also share a mutual aversion and hatred for sin where ever it pops up in our lives. When we have the opportunity to tell someone the reason for season and wish them Merry Christmas we don't want to do this in a spirit of anger or lacking in love or become what Isaiah calls a wicked fool. We want to walk down the road of holiness, on the way to our eternal home, striving with our brothers and sisters in Christ to treat people as Jesus treated them when he walked on this earth. This Advent and Christmas season provides glorious opportunities to be like the shepherds who "returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard."

Isaiah pictures the people of God coming into Zion singing, with everlasting joy crowning their heads. "They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee." Oh, don't you see the people streaming into Jerusalem, walking up to the temple mount in Jerusalem, joining together in songs they have sung together for years. God's people were known all over the world for their singing in the temple courts as tens of thousands of people joined their voices in singing. It just didn't happen accidentally. The Lord required priests to function in the towns and villages who taught the people their songs for worship so when they came together everyone was singing together some of the great songs of their faith such as Psalm 118 that begins with "O give thanks unto the Lord..." So we come together and sing the great songs of our faith. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "Joy to the World," "O Come All Ye Faithful, Joyful and Triumphant." We joyfully sing about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and we joyfully sing about his coming again in glory. Just say Merry Christmas. Apply this to yourself first and then share this greeting with others. Amen.