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Permission to Celebrate

a sermon on Isaiah 60.1-3

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Are you ready for Christmas? I am not sure I am. I'm not sure I'll be ready by the time it gets here. Every year Christmas decorations go up earlier in the stores. I started seeing them the day after Halloween. Even before Thanksgiving, at least one radio station switched to an all-Christmas, all-the-time format. And that lulls me into a false sense of security. The lights and music don't ring warning bells anymore, so I feel as if I still have a long way to go. Then before I know what's happening, I'm right in the middle of the holiday season, stunned like a sleepwalker who awakes in an unexpected place, and I wonder, "What happened?"

Ready or not, Christmas is coming. The holiday season has arrived in all its busy, noisy glory. Thanksgiving, shopping, maybe traveling, dinners and parties, Christmas, New Year, then this year a short winter season before Mardi Gras kicks off. Easter comes early this year. Ready or not, it has begun. You can run, but you can't hide.

Of course, some people love nothing better than Christmas. The lights, the music, the memories and good times thrill their soul. People tell me, "I love Christmas! I wish we had Christmas all year round!" I appreciate their point of view. When I think of the Preschool children standing here signing Christmas songs, my heart warms. We've already sent our shoeboxes filled with presents to needy children somewhere in the world. That's a tradition I like. There's also the angel tree. Think of the difference one small act of kindness makes, and at this time of year many people are willing to step out and perform a small act of kindness. My favorite part of Christmas has always been the Christmas Eve service. In the dark sanctuary, we stand singing, each holding one little candle. It reminds me of the parable Jesus told about how the kingdom of God begins small, like a tiny seed, but grows and grows until that seed has become a mighty tree. The sanctuary brightens as the flame from the Christ candle passes from one person to the next. Even the most bah-humbug, Grinchiest Christian has to admit the beauty that can still be found in Christmas, if you know where to look for it.

On the other hand, many people dread the holidays. "I wish I could go to sleep and wake up when it's over," more than one has confessed to me. And I appreciate this point of view also. If you are grieving, the holidays become the worst time of the year. You have to be patient with yourself, change your routine, and push through by an exhausting effort of will power.

There are many other reasons, besides grief, for people to hold their nose through the holidays and only breathe easy on the other side. You may be lonely. Christmas is an especially difficult time to be lonely because of the expectation that families get together. Grocery store commercials depict stereotypical families, well-dressed in a beautifully decorated mansion, eating a gourmet feast; the children behave perfectly; everyone gets along because they are all just so happy to be there. In reality, they just want you to shop at their store. But the image has a powerful hold on our imaginations.

Some people feel overwhelmed by Christmas. The decorations, the music blaring in every store, the crowds, the traffic, the busy-ness – it's just a bit too much. These folks believe in the true meaning of Christmas. They grow tired of the commercial trappings.

Still other people, who generally enjoy the holidays, find themselves exhausted as they shop, host, and rush from place to place. The holidays don't just happen. They require a lot of work. Some work long hours at their jobs. Some spend all day cooking and cleaning. Have you heard the joke about the guy who kept hitting himself in the head with a hammer? Asked why he did it, he explained, "Because it feels so good when I stop." If you have a million things to do, and find yourself looking forward to January 2, maybe you know how he feels.

Finally, some people are not happy about Christmas, and they don't have a specific reason. They just don't feel like it. They do not begrudge others the opportunity to have a good time, but they just don't see what all the fuss is about.

I confess that I am one who quickly feels overwhelmed. I enjoy Christmas, but there is so much I could do without. At the same time, I sense a need. I feel a need, deep inside, to celebrate. I want to lay my worries aside, forget about all the bad stuff for just a while, and celebrate. I want to feel good. I want to find that joy hiding down in my heart and let it out. I can think of two good reasons to celebrate at Christmas. One, we need to celebrate sometimes. God made us this way. He created us with a capacity to change our routines, grab hold of something good, and let the joy out. If we never do that, we begin to wear down. We become like an engine that has gone too long since its last oil change. The gunk builds up in our souls. We need the spiritual equivalent of a flush and fill. We need joy to pour over us like water in a shower, washing away the pain, the boredom, and the aches we get from doing our part and hitting the line day after day after day. In other words, you need to come to the Christmas Eve service and belt out those old songs. It will do your heart good. You need to find other ways to celebrate as well.

But that's just the first reason to celebrate. The second matters even more: God has given us a reason to celebrate! You have a Savior! True, Christmas is not as important as Good Friday and Easter. But, in the grand scheme, Christmas is mighty important.

Christmas celebrates the birth of the Savior. The eternal Son of God took flesh and was born as a human being. He is fully human—exactly like us in every way except sin. He is fully divine, so that to see him is to see the Father. He did not leave us alone. He helped us in our misery. Christmas celebrates God-with-us. We have a Savior, and that is worth celebrating.

So what if most of the music you hear in stores is both secular and cheesy? So what if your company doesn't give a Christmas bonus this year? So what if all you get for Christmas is a sweater, when what you really wanted was real estate? So what if your family isn't perfect? So what if you have to spend Christmas day alone? So what if your family circumstances have changed and this year won't compare to the fun gatherings of yesteryear? I do not mean to imply that your problems or sorrows are unimportant. But remember, you have a Savior! When you weigh all the heartbreak on one side against this one solid unchangeable fact—you have a Savior—well, you might not feel jolly (and that's OK), but you can at least feel relief, gratitude, and some measure of joy. God loved you—you personally—enough to come in person in order to rescue you from the darkness. That has to count for something. It ought to count for a lot. It makes all the difference. Life is not a senseless tragedy, which it would have been without God's intervention. If he had not shined his light upon us, we would have lived and died forever in darkness.

When I call you to celebrate, I am not saying the darkness in your life is not real. This is not one of those happy-happy, rah-rah, everything-is-great sermons. I know nearly everyone in this congregation fairly well. I know some of the pain and struggle. I can imagine and guess some of the rest. The darkness is real. Your life may be very dark indeed. But ... and this little conjunction *but* is the heart of this sermon ... but ... no matter how dark your life may be, the darkness is not total. The light shines, for you have a Savior. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. It is not the light of a single candle or even a floodlight. It is the light of the rising sun. It may be quite dim at the moment. The darkness may be all around you, heavy, suffocating. But the light is shining. And the light will never go out. It will only get brighter and brighter. "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." You have a Savior!

Our scripture reading this morning from the book of Isaiah comes from a time of mingled hope and discouragement. You have heard me talk before about the Babylonian exile, when Jerusalem was destroyed and God's people were taken captive to Babylon. The prophets kept saying it was not the end of God's people. God would give them a new beginning. And he did. After about seventy years, many of them returned and began to rebuild their lives and nation. As you might expect, they went through many ups and downs. The prophets had spoken of a new day, when God's glory would return and he would make a new covenant with his people and on and on

they went. Naturally, expectations were high. But no matter how high the highs went, reality never matched up to the promises.

So on the one hand, God had done great things for them – amazing things. They could not help feeling grateful. But on the other hand, they felt disappointed and dissatisfied with their lives. Was this really all God had planned for them?

Does their feeling sound familiar? It does to me. I look at my life, and I have no doubt I have been blessed. God has been so good to me. I have no grounds to complain. And yet, if I let myself, I could spend all day in prayer telling God how I wish things were. I suspect I am not alone. When you look at your life, you see more blessings than you can count. Big ones: health, family, a good job, a long fruitful life, a nice place to live, nourishing food – maybe you don't have them all, but you have been blessed. Everyone here has two tremendous blessings: You have a living Savior – that's the best blessing of all – and you have a good church. So the blessings are there, but let's face it, you live in a fallen world. God's will is not always done on earth as it is in heaven. You are a broken human being, because we all are. The only hope any of us has is God's grace. So given the facts that you are an imperfect person, living among imperfect people in an imperfect world, there's a lot of room for things to go wrong. No matter how good your life is, some heartache will always be knocking on the door. So maybe you know how the Israelites felt as they worked to rebuild their nation. Gratitude and disappointment dance together in your heart, and you cannot always tell who is leading.

Into their situation, and into ours, God spoke a word of encouragement. If one of them could have asked God, "Is this all there is? Is this life we have now what the prophets were talking about, or is there more?" God would have chuckled, smiled, and answered, "Oh, no, my child. This is not all. It is only the beginning. I am about to do something so wonderful, ... well, you'd never believe it. Right now, you think the prophets exaggerated. Before I am finished, you will know they understated things. I am not just going to bless my people Israel. I am going to save the whole world. I am going to send a Savior. He will die for the sins of every man, woman, and child. His blood will be the new covenant. All who believe in him will be born anew. They will be my people, my own dear children. I will pour my Spirit upon them send them out with power into this world I love so much. They will tell the story, so that more and more will believe. And in the end, my Son, the Savior, will return to make all things new. Then you will see my glory fully revealed. The darkness will disappear forever. So patience, my child, patience. I will do it all in my own time."

God sent us a Savior! For the faithful of old, Jesus' coming was a future event. The prophets pointed to it. They promised a king like David, a prophet like Moses, a suffering servant, and a light in the darkness. God's Word sustained his people, but they could not foresee all that would take place. We know about it, because Jesus came,

and we have the gospels. We know the Savior. We have only hints and clues about his coming kingdom. We know he will return someday to set things right. We long for that day. Advent, you know, is not just about getting ready for Christmas. It is about preparing for Christ. God's people waited a long time for his first advent – his first coming. We've waited a long time for his second advent. That's OK. God works by his own schedule. He will keep his promise. Christ will return. In the meantime, he is with us. His Spirit lives in us. He has given us a mission. So we do the work he has given us. We try to honor him with our lives. And we live with joy. We have a risen Savior! He came to us. He died for us. He lives and reigns. If you know him, you have a light that no darkness, no matter how suffocating, can ever put out.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

Are you ready for Christmas? Ready or not, here it comes. I don't know about you, but I need to celebrate. I have an excellent reason to celebrate. So I hereby give myself permission to celebrate. If you feel you need permission, for whatever reason, I hereby give it to you as well. Christmas is about one thing: God sent a Savior. You have a risen Savior. That's all the reason you need.

If you are one of those people who can't get enough Christmas, you probably don't need permission to celebrate. You've been hard at it already. Good for you. To you I would simply say: Don't lose focus on why you are celebrating. It's fun to have parties and get together with friends. Giving and receiving presents. Mercy, the football matchups before us make the mind salivate. That's all well and good, but the reason we celebrate is Jesus. Worship should be the center of your holiday plans. Throw in some good deeds. Give to someone in need. Do something nice for someone. Strike a blow against the darkness.

If you are one of those people who would rather skip Christmas, you have my permission to do that, with one exception. Do not forget the Savior. You do not have to go to parties. You do not have to give presents or decorate. But you must celebrate the Savior. You can do that with a good deed or two. Again, worship is important. Remember, no matter how you *feel*, the reality is this: The light is stronger than the darkness. The light is Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world. He is the hope of the world. Whatever else you do this year, celebrate him.

If you do not know the Savior, you should. There is no reason you cannot put your faith in him, repent, and ask him for eternal life. He is eager to give you this gift. If you do not know him, I would love to introduce you. He can be your Savior too.

I end with the very Words of God, spoken to us about his Son, Jesus Christ, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Amen.