

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 31, 2017
First Sunday of Christmas

Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Psalm 147:13-21
Galatians 3:23-4:7
John 1:1-18

Statistically speaking, this Sunday is usually one of the least attended Sundays in terms of church attendance. Various reasons may account for this.

It may be that families are still traveling or returning from their travels on this day.

In some places the weather may play a factor.

And there may also be an emotional or spiritual reason. Once Christmas day is over, persons sometimes experience a great “letdown,” a collective sigh that comes after weeks of frenetic activity. A great deal of the time, this would be natural, for all of that frenetic activity is sometimes structured such that Christmas day is the *culmination*, the end of that activity. And once the end happens, then it’s time to catch your breath.

But in the Christian calendar, Christmas is not the culmination, but the *beginning*, of something. The Christmas season *begins* on December 25, rather than ending on December 25. It runs for twelve days until the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. The birth of Christ means then, that the party is just beginning, just getting underway.

And perhaps nothing symbolizes the essence of a party more than a wedding. A wedding is one of the few remaining occasions for which most everyone dresses up. A wedding is the epitome of celebration and joy, the essence of festivity.

It is not surprising, then, that Isaiah speaks of God's work to bring salvation to the people in images of the wedding. And the theme is one of overwhelming joy.

And with good reason. For Christmas heralds a remarkable transformation. It speaks forth the news that Christ is born, that we have been forgiven, that we have been set free and dressed in new clothes of salvation and righteousness.

For Isaiah's crowd, it meant that God had broken his silence, that years of captivity and oppression were over, that the God of justice was coming to bring an end to oppression.

One might think that God was ready to divorce his people for breaking the covenant and rebelling against him. But instead of a divorce between God and his people, God comes and plans a glorious wedding, complete with the wedding clothes.

And in the birth of Christ, God takes the smelly rags of shepherds and the swaddling clothes of a child in Bethlehem and fashions a wedding dress of

salvation and righteousness for all humankind. The birth of Christ proclaims with power that God loves us, God accepts us, and God forgives us.

Our response to this -- if it parallels that of Isaiah -- is twofold. First is overwhelming joy. We are overcome with joy that God would visit us in this way, that God would send his only-begotten Son to be born and to live among us and to reclaim us for himself.

We are overwhelmed with joy that the God of the universe would take on human form, would take our sin upon himself so that we might be forgiven and made new. Overwhelmed with joy that he came to pay a debt he did not owe because we owed a debt we could not pay. Overwhelmed because when we deserved to be confined to the dungeon of our own despair, instead we were invited to a wedding.

*No more let sin and sorrow grow
Nor thorns infest the ground.
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found...
Joy to the world!*

But being invited to a wedding celebration and being clothed with the garments of salvation brings forth another response from God's people. For in addition to God calling us to be joyful, he also calls us to be *righteous*.

Isaiah prays for Zion, praying that her righteousness will shine forth like the dawn and her salvation will blaze like a burning torch.

One preacher reflects on Isaiah's image of wedding clothes and draws this conclusion:

We are indeed all dressed up, but God's purpose is much larger than a lesson in haberdashery. There are few statements sadder than "all dressed up and nowhere to go." We are called to go forth from our churches and be God's people, to struggle with war and poverty and illness, and to break our silence and proclaim words of hope.

(Harold C. Warlick, "Light in the Land of Shadows," in Lectionary Homiletics 14:1, p. 32)

Several years ago an African-American woman moved from Georgia to North Carolina with her thirteen year old son. Her son was a gifted viola player, and she had moved to North Carolina to enroll him in the North Carolina school for the Arts.

The young man had a scholarship audition coming soon, and his mother wanted him to be prepared. She believed that giving a solo concert would be good preparation for the audition, and so she set about to find him a venue.

She opened the Yellow Pages, and began calling all the churches in the area, looking for a congregation that would allow her son to perform a concert. Church after church turned her down, but eventually one congregation accepted and a concert date was arranged.

The day arrived, and about sixty well-dressed and affluent parishioners showed up. The young man arrived with his viola, dressed in tennis shoes and a ragged felt jacket. He didn't own a suit. But his talent with the viola was

impressive. After the concert, the congregation pitched in to buy the young man several suits of clothing.

He went off to his audition in Washington, D.C., and no one heard from him for more than seven years. Then one day, the pastor of that congregation received an envelope in the mail. He opened it, and there was a half-page feature article from the *Winston-Salem Journal*. The headline read: “Winston-Salem Musician is Chosen to Play at Carnegie Hall.” Beneath the article was a large picture of the young man who had played his first solo concert in tennis shoes and a ragged felt jacket. Only in this picture, he was dressed in a splendid tuxedo.

Beneath the picture were these handwritten words: “Thank you for helping me to make my dream come true.”

Brothers and sisters, Christ is born. The celebration has begun, for we have been transformed. And with that transformation comes the responsibility to take Christmas into the world in which we live, to live the joy that the coming of Christ means for all people.

Our collect for the day says it so well: “Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives.”

Brothers and sisters, Christ is born. Let the joy of his birth fill your lives,
and let that joy spill over into the lives of others. For the celebration is not ending;
it is just getting started!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.