

“Joy, Joy, Joy”

Sermon for 22 December 2019

Texts: Gen. 21:1-7; Isaiah 9:1-7 Luke 2:9-11 and Romans 4:18-25

First, she's penniless, then she's jobless, then she's car-less—so, Merry Christmas! Does it sound heartless to wish someone “Merry Christmas” when things are so bleak? So hopeless! To someone at the end of his/her resources . . . at wit's end, at the point where nothing seems to be going right and there's no relief in sight? How's that caring, happy or hopeful. The lady I have in view didn't have the means to put Thanksgiving on the table. And yet she feasted on Thanksgiving Day! Surrounded by family despite the circumstances of penniless, jobless and car-less . . . and running out of oil besides just as the mortgage/rent payment was due. It's as if her debt had latched on to her and was purposing to take her down to destitution and ruin. Her fear that she could lose it all was realistic, reasonable. But, wait, didn't I just say she feasted at Thanksgiving?! Well, yes, I did. And what if I went on to the next stage and told you this: she was penniless so that she could learn to rely on God for her blessing, her food, her feast for the family. She was penniless so that she could see the “kindness” of the Lord despite her inability, her limits, in spite of her insecurities. *She didn't know that we are all beggars before God—and that is true financially as well as morally and spiritually! She didn't know that walking away from God, living to please herself, falling short in so many ways—disappointing herself, her dreams, her upbringing—God was still God.*

If you have faith the size of mustard seed, you could speak to this mountain and say, “Be cast into the sea.” And it would be so. (Matt. 21:21, Mark 11:23) I can honestly say, earth-moving wasn't on her mind. She was having trouble mending broken blinds and getting her car repaired! Oh, wait, maybe her concerns of money, house, heat, employment and transportation were her mountain. So, let me continue with the next page. She was allowed to be penniless to learn to rely on God, she lost her job so that she could get a new one! She traded in the old job, with it's low wages and no benefits, and, through divine favor (something she had forgotten about, or lost track of, or, more probably was robbed of in the shuffle of rejection and abandonment that has beaten her down); yes, through divine favor she got a new job, higher wages, and benefits. Now, maybe she is thinking, maybe there is a God who has not forgotten me. Oh, and about the car. She finds that she is within walking distance of home and work. Imagine that. Now she will earn enough to pick up another vehicle if she wishes to, or needs to, or wants to! I would say, maybe she has a lot to be thankful for and that she got to feast before things broke her way. Now she can say, “God is good” but God was always good. Maybe now she senses that God is in charge, but God has always been in charge. We may forget to pray **Give us this day our daily bread** but he does not forget! He delivers. And, I am glad to report that she is happier, grateful . . . and she is joyful in despite of darkness, in despite of discouragement and temptation to despair. I cannot say her prayer life was stellar—because I don't know. Here is what I do know, that God has mercy on the downtrodden. She qualified. Defeat was at hand and she was victorious over it through the grace and sheer mercy of God. And this is gospel breaking news—not from a book, not from long ago and yesteryear, not from Snap Chat or a music video but from real time. real life. This woman lives up the road, she lives now, she is related to some of us and we are all so grateful. And Jesus said, Luke 19:9, **“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man—even this woman— too is a son of Abraham.**

Now I have something very important to announce: **Blessed are the pure in heart, they shall see God.** (Matt. 6:11) We have sung, sometime, the words to “Refiner’s Fire:”

Purify my heart
 Let me be as gold and precious silver
 Purify my heart
 Let me be as gold, pure gold
 Refiner’s fire, my heart’s one desire
 Is to be holy
 Set apart for You, Lord
 I choose to be holy
 Set apart for You, my Master
 Ready to do Your will
 Purify my heart
 Cleanse me from within and make me holy
 Purify my heart
 Cleanse me from my sin, deep within

These words reflect a holy desire for the kind of purity that enables those who want to see God to be purified. It asks God to do something. It isn’t something we can do. And I bring it up because I am convinced that seeing God is no different from hearing God on the level of what needs to happen to us, for us. We sang these words this morning:

“O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us, we pray;
 Cast out our sin and enter in; Be born in us today.”

And that is precisely what needs to happen. We need that “holy Child . . . to descend . . . and to be born in us today.” We need the holiness of Christ to be imputed to us, to be born in us . . . we need the purity of Christ because his purity is what renders us pure. We are purified when he is born in us—**his nature** is pure gold, as precious silver. His holiness is what makes us holy. So our choice to be holy is our recognition of his being within us, his residence in us. If we are not occupied by him, we are neither pure, nor precious, nor holy. Paul cried out, Galatians 2:20: **I have been crucified with Christ [that is, in Him I have shared His crucifixion]; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith [by adhering to, relying on, and completely trusting] in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.**¹ Amplified Bible. And if we are not pure and holy, we shall neither see, or hear from God. Ask God to impute to you Christ’s purity. It is something only God can do. Then, listen up.

¹What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn’t work. So I quit being a “law man” so that I could be God’s man. Christ’s life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not “mine,” but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that. Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God’s grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily

Hear now with the hearing of Christ! There is joy for Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebekah when they were “baby-fied.” There is similar joy for Zachariah and Elizabeth. There is even greater joy for Joseph and Mary, in fact, **good news of great joy what will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.** (Luke 2:10-11) The cause of the joy was, **in the fullness of time**, the literal birth of a child, a son in historical fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 9:1-7. Isaiah prophesied the doom of gloom and, when it was fulfilled, Christmas joy took its place! Seriously:

1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles

**2 The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land, *in deep darkness*,
The light will shine on them.**

**3 You (*Lord God*) shall multiply the nation,
You shall increase their gladness, their joy;
They will be glad in Your presence, Lord,
As with the gladness, the joy of harvest,
As men rejoice greatly when they divide the spoil.**

**4 For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders,
The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian².**

**5 For every boot of the booted warrior in the battle tumult,
And cloak rolled in blood, will be for burning, fuel for the fire.**

**6 For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will be, or will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.**

**7 There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.**

² God commands Moses to lead the Children of Israel into battle against Midian as vengeance for causing them to sin at Baal Peor, after which Moses will die.-The Israel Bible. Some commentators have the effrontery to accuse God of war crimes (!) which is a refusal to see the use of military might to effect divine and justified judgment. God is always just.

This citation is chiefly for the record! Remember, Isaiah spoke, in his day, to a nation in deep despondency, in a collective moroseness, a sadness born of exile and national chastisement. The darkness on the land consisted of hopelessness, disappointment and despair. A dimension of incredulity, shock, that the hammer had fallen and the punishment of their sins was upon them—God was dealing with their flight from justice, mercy and holiness. We could say their depravity; it would suffice. So the darkness is spiritual in nature just as the promised light, the shining light is spiritual. God was up to something. He was enlightening them and their land. God was doing what only he could do and it is done!

Isaiah 9 vv. 4 & 5 detail the yoke of oppression, and the tumult of warfare first in his own setting. **Rolled in blood**, is, in the first instance, lifted, and in the second instance, **warfare** is consumed as if by fire. The deliverance is to be complete, but the means, of our deliverance today is truly startling: **a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us.** (v.6a & b) The means are disproportionate to the catastrophe . . . *miraculously so!*

The identity of this son, our Lord, upon whose shoulders **the government shall be**, is covered in his four titles (as rendered here): **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.** There is a breadth of competency between these “title” roles, sufficient to the transformation of all human governance, on every level. Yes, governmental transformation, not improvement, not reform (!) but a transformation so total and so complete as to warrant the appellation of **a whole new nation.** This new government will grow, and increase (*it is the Kingdom of God and of His Christ*) while the former order of nations, states and governments shall atrophy and wither away! And of this kingdom, established on the throne of David, **there will be no end.** (v.7a) **The zeal of the Lord will accomplish this.** (v. 7d)

Yes, **the end of gloom for her who was in anguish**, Isaiah 9:1), this great, immense and thorough redemption will be entirely the Lord’s doing—**all the glory, all the honor and praise will go to him.** This removal of national reproach overshadows the lesser reproaches of feminine barrenness—in Sarah, Rebekah, in Leah and Rachael . . . in Hannah and, in New Testament era, Elizabeth. This list of miraculous births is hardly exhaustive! Although we know the Lord giveth conception—see Ruth 4:13—we read: **So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the Lord gave her conception.** Ruth had been barren up to this point in time! In this she is like Hannah, the mother of Samuel of whom it is written: **Indeed the Lord visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters.** (1 Samuel 2:21) This was foreshadowed in Sarah’s as recorded in Gen. 21:1-2:

21:1 The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. 2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.

There was no surprise, no reveal party in this case! And, for the record, they both rejoiced greatly in the birth of Isaac. The son of Promise. Isaac was the future nation of Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel sprang from the loins of Jacob after God removed the reproach of barrenness from both Leah and Rachael! Their conceptions were likewise miraculous—*something only God could do!* Yes, something only God can do is the

emergent theme here. Christmas is all about what only God can do. Jesus is shorthand for the will of the Father: in sending the Son, as a child to be born of Mary, under the Law, for the sake of lost sinners, out of his tender mercy and steadfast love, that, more properly, is the reason for the season. God sent his Son to save lost sinners, to redeem the world, to lift the gloom, to end the reign of terror, of darkness, sin, death and the devil . . . and God is so powerful that he did all of that through the sheer gift of a child, **unto us a son is given!** It is something of a cliché to say, “Jesus is the reason for the season³.” The opening salvo of this great triumph was dependency, weakness, vulnerability from amongst the humble, the poor and the despised . . . a baby broke the back of the evil empire. Of course, only God could do such a thing in such a way. All glory goes to him!

The **end of gloom for her who was in anguish. (Isaiah 9:1) Wow! The gloom is doomed!** *Line up* the “usual suspects” from amongst the scripturally morose! One could hardly get more morose than Naomi, the mother-in-law of Ruth. She returned to Bethlehem from Moab defeated, discouraged, despondent and despairing. She finds her hope in Bethlehem—so, in a way, don’t we all! The grieving, impoverished and desperate woman has her situation redeemed, finds in her kinsman redeemer a husband for her daughter-in-law and ends up a joyous grandmother with a baby in her arms, her heir. God is just so kind, so particular . . . so meticulous in mercy. He brings joy out of sadness. Yes, and he brings good out of badness. The gloom is doomed because God is good, and glorious, gracious and generous.

Let’s review what God has gifted us with in Christmas⁴. First, there’s being chosen by God. Then there’s being redeemed by the blood, followed by being made a citizen of the kingdom and an heir of heaven, co-heir with Christ! Eternal life and rewards. And we shouldn’t leave off the glorious fusion of holiness of character and joyfulness of Spirit that our saving faith bequeathes to us. The forgiveness of our sins capped with the declaration of our righteousness. We are justified in Christ; gifted and empowered by the Holy Spirit. More than a gift for each of the twelve days of Christmas! If, again, if we profess that this is our state, our redeemed condition before God, **then we are bound to be joyful!** We are only acting reasonably, in view of all these benefits, when we rejoice and with glad thanksgiving glorify our God and benefactor. Talk about something only God can do, beloved, this is it! These blessings are the substance of Christmas—its true essence. Its cause for joy. Notice how durable these gifts are, how they enrich the soul forever. Truly they underscore that we are created for a greater joy, a more lasting peace and for an endless love in eternity.

Until I prepared this message I had little idea how central this miraculous birth business is: all the way from Sarah to Mary. It is central to the Romans 4 passage so rich in Christian doctrine. It follows hard on Romans 3 where Paul expounds **the**

³ This phrase can be a great opener, a conversation starter. “People say that. I wonder what they mean by it?” Do they mean his coming is the end of gloom, divine mercy, God’s compassionate response to our anguish? Do they mean, “Jesus is salvation. Jesus is the embodiment of God’s saving purposes which were before the world began?” If Jesus has made you glad, are you primed and ready to explain your reason for joy? Think of Jesus as shorthand for the will of the Father.

⁴ I have in mind the practice of writing out a list of the gifts received so as to send out thank-you’s to the givers.

righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (v.22) all . . . are justified by his grace as a gift (v. 24!). Vital doctrines! Ch. 4 begins with this question: **What shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?** (That is, by lineage, biological and physical descent.) **For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.** This is where the difference between Ishmael and Isaac becomes critical. The miraculous birth of Isaac (something only God could do!) is radically different from the conception of Ishmael by Abraham's own seed⁵, through polygamous union with Hagar. That is why Ishmael must be dismissed, sent away. He is not the seed of promise; Isaac is. Isaac's birth was the birth of Israel. Praise God.

Now, in Romans 4:17, after declaring that Abraham is the father of us all, we have this distinction, **I have made you the father of many nations—in the presence of the God in whom he believed.** Now note this, God gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. So, the power of resurrection (one doctrine) is coupled with God's capacity **to create *ex nihilo*** (another doctrine) in the **seed of promise** (a third doctrine). This is the crux of Isaac's *miraculous birth*; its centrality—the other promises of God not withstanding. **Life to the dead** refers both to Abraham's old age, stressed twice and enumerated the third time (as being 100 hundred years old) and to the barrenness of Sarah's womb. Paul makes exactly these points with **He did not weaken in his faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead . . . or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.** (v.19) Then comes the concluding verse 20: **No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith AS HE GAVE GLORY TO GOD.**

THAT IS WHY HIS FAITH WAS COUNTED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

What does the **that, in his faith** here refer to? ***It refers to the faith he had that God would deliver on the promise of Isaac.*** The faith that resulted in **being counted righteous** was not generic; no, it was very particular, very specific. Abraham's faith was in the God who promised and then did what only God could do: ***gave him a son.*** Creation, conception, redemption, resurrection. Our faith is in the One who accomplishes all things according to his perfect will.

⁵ Jesus clarifies this matter of the **offspring of Abraham** in John 8:39-44: 39 **They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father."** Jesus ***said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham.** 40 **But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do.** 41 **You are doing the deeds of your father."** They said to Him, **"We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God."** 42 **Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me.** 43 **Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word.** 44 **You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.** It is disturbing, but true, children of God and children of the devil co-exist in this world . The good news is that the latter can be converted to the former by grace through faith in Christ alone.

Now let's skip to the dedication of Jesus in the Temple (the rites of purification that came forty days after birth). Simeon, who is hailed as **righteous and devout** (Luke 2:25) is so-called because of his redeeming faith: **for my eyes have seen your salvation**—this confession is made in the temple, again, forty days after Jesus' birth! **According to your word.** Simeon says—remember Mary's devout response, **let it be to me according to your word**— Simeon continues in that vein: **that (salvation) you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel**—which Israel was Isaac at this birth! From Isaac would emerge God's people as promised long before.

Now I want to do something akin to singing a song. I want you to hear without trying to remember it all . . . I am looking for the impression, not the specific content:

- you will baffle your critics and adversaries
- you will perform better
- you will behave your best
- you will be a better worker, artisan, professional
- you will share joy instead of misery
- you will spread kindness
- you will spread happiness (nothing dour, sour or bitter)
- your digestion will improve
- you will be both more peaceful and patient
- your inward steadiness will calm others
- you will be stronger and more positive
- your testimony will be improved
- your life will be powerful, energetic, effective
- your strength in the Lord will make you strong for the Lord
- you will be prepared for life in heaven
- you will rejoice in singing, praising and worshipping because it's your future
- you will be a joy to be around
- you will be able to delight in the Lord and one another

And if that's not joy enough, I'm sure there are others in your life who could expand the list of benefits. Or, I have a better song for you: Psalm 107. So much better!

The new birth of every believer also originates with God. It is *from heaven* through the Holy Spirit. *It is something that only God can do.* It is miraculous. For all who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God are "sin-incapacitated." Helpless, old, beyond it. This Christmas, simply try to bring your joy in line with your professed faith—everyone will notice and some may even praise you for your example. Therefore, remember: Christ must do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He has come and done it. If he has done so for you, you have particular cause to rejoice.

Amen

Here are the eight doctrines pertinent to this sermon:

1. Righteousness comes by faith alone.
2. The Seed of Promise fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ.
3. Resurrection power brings to life that which was dead.
4. God retains creation power, bringing about things that were not.
5. Justification comes by grace through faith.
6. Unbelief makes us “children of the Devil.”
7. Through faith in Christ we become a people for God’s glory.
8. We must be born again, from heaven as it were, which is something God alone can do!

Eternal life comes by the affirmation of these truths and all that by trusting in Jesus Christ. Therefore, repent and believe that you may be saved. Life, in fact, is terrible apart from faith in Jesus Christ.