WHAT ARE YOU SMILING ABOUT?

1. The Lord brings salvation to the afflicted
2. He provides a way out of confusion

Christmas is almost here! Less than two weeks and the whole ordeal will finally be over for another year! I actually heard someone say that. Sadly, he is right. For a lot of people, Christmas is not a time of happiness, but a time of frustration. It is not a time for joy, but sadness and depression.

It appears that the Christmas holiday has become an obligation - something we must endure. And don't dare have a good time doing it! Smile and wish someone a Merry Christmas and they might look at you as if to say: What are you so happy about?

The truth is we hear that question all of the time, whether it is Christmas or not. The devil, our sinful hearts, even this crazy world, challenges our joy and happiness everyday. What are you smiling about?, they ask. Thankfully, we have an answer, especially during Advent and Christmas. Today, we see the reason for our joy and happiness. We are smiling because The Lord brings salvation to the afflicted and he provides a way out of confusion.

It has been said that more people become sad and depressed at Christmas then at another time of the year. I can understand that. Now, I realize that Christmas can be hard if you have had a loved one die or if you have fallen on financially hard times. Yet most people have no real reason to be unhappy, and yet they are.

I do not think the issue is a matter of unhappiness as much as it is one of emptiness. People feel empty. They feel unfulfilled. They feel unsatisfied. And these feelings come from people who have so much. Our lives are not empty of blessings. Blessings abound. Still we feel unhappy and dissatisfied.

I think this happens because we confuse fun with joy. To have fun is not the same thing as being joyful. In fact, we can be joyful even when we are not having fun. But fun becomes crucial if you are using it as a substitute for real joy. If what you feel deep inside is not joy but emptiness, then you need to fill that emptiness somehow. You have to find a way to distract yourself because the alternative is to hurt, and to hurt badly. And so you will go to any lengths to amuse yourself. No price is too much to pay if it takes your mind off that emptiness inside.

Just consider the phenomenon known as The Holiday Shopping Season. The day after Thanksgiving people flock to the store to buy and buy and buy. The day after Christmas people flock back to the stores to return, return, and return. The reason for this is because people are not happy. People still feel empty and unfulfilled. None of those gifts provided lasting joy, so the alternative is to take them back for something else. Now, I am not saying that shopping or gift giving is bad. It is not. That is a wonderful part of Christmas. But if the hope of receiving that perfect gift becomes the sum total of your Christmas, then it is no wonder people are so unhappy and empty inside.

If people today feel empty inside, they are not the first ones. A world of inner emptiness is exactly what Isaiah is describing here when he talks about a world of feeble hands and weak knees. It was a world that had no confidence anymore, a world that has lost its nerve. It was a place of sorrow and sighing and fearful hearts. In Isaiah's day, the people of Judah were extremely fearful. They looked at the world scene and saw an invasion on the horizon. The people of Judah were soon to be invaded, captured, and sent into exile in Babylon. They lost their homes, their livelihoods, and their families. Our fears are the same. We have fears of crime and disease and poverty. Fear of the future. Fear of death. Fear, sometimes of we-don't-know-what, but fear all the same.
All this is what suddenly changes, Isaiah says. **Sorrow and sighing flee away.** Fear is replaced with joy: not fun, but joy. Joy in all the world because the Lord is come.

God comes into the world. Suddenly, lonely, sad people in a lonely, sad world see God. They see his glory. They see his splendor. They see his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus comes into the world to show us what God is like: to show us how powerful he is, but also how kind and compassionate. Jesus comes to show us that we are not alone and we never have been. Our enemies are fierce and our fears are real - but God knows all about them and he cares. And he cares enough to become one of us, to stoop down to our own level, to put his shoulder underneath the burden of all our fears and worries and take it away. He cared enough to be born into our world, to live with us, to die for us, to be our Savior.

And when that Savior comes, he makes a change everywhere. If our lonely, sad world is like a spiritual desert, as Isaiah describes it, then Jesus comes and suddenly water starts gushing forth everywhere. This desert bursts into bloom. The prophet describes this dramatic change with pictures. He speaks about Lebanon. It is world renown for its beautiful cedar trees, so **Lebanon's glory** - tall, beautiful cedar trees - suddenly growing where there once was only hot, dry sand. The **excellence of Carmel and Sharon** appear in this desert. Carmel is a beautiful, fertile mountainside, and Sharon is a plain that was once full of wild flowers, and in Israel today grows oranges. This is a poetic way of describing how, where people are sad and sorrowful, then Jesus comes and their **sorrow and sighing flee away.** When the blind, the lame, the deaf and the dumb meet Jesus, they are healed. People who are shaking with fear suddenly burst out laughing and singing. Not simply because they have decided they ought to lighten up. Not because they have found a new, better way to amuse themselves or because someone finally got what they wanted for Christmas. It is because there is now joy in the world. It is because the Lord is here.

The joy we find in Jesus is not mere pointless fun. Pointless is the last word you would use to describe it. The joy we find in Christ is not like getting a present that we set aside once the newness wears off. Our joy is purposeful. It is meaningful. The Lord, when he comes, provides a way out of confusion. Isaiah says the Lord builds a superhighway for us to travel on, and on it, we can get somewhere.

This highway appears in the desert. It is called **The Holy Way.** And it heads straight for Zion - that hill in Jerusalem where God's people gather - what we today know as the Holy Christian Church. This is a safe highway. There are not any **ravenous animals** on it, or any other roadside hazards. and unlike most of our highways around here, this one does not have a traffic problem. **Wicked fools will not wander onto it,** Isaiah says - literally, he says that fools will not drift back and forth on it, clogging up traffic and putting everyone in danger because they do not know where they are going. The people on this highway know where they are going.

This road is only for those who **walk in that way.** Did you know that before Christianity was called Christianity and Christians were called Christians, our faith was simply called: **the Way**? It is the way back to God; the way of holiness; the way we become holy through the forgiveness of all our sins.

This highway is for the ransomed, the redeemed. That means it is for those who have been **bought back.** And and every one of Isaiah's original readers knew exactly what he meant by that. The words **ransomed** and **redeemed** have in mind a person who fell on hard times. Thru hardship or bad luck, he ran up debts so high he could not pay them. And so he sometimes had to sell himself into slavery, so that his debts could be paid. When that happened to someone, it was the duty of one of his relatives to step in and buy him back. His rich relative would pay the price for him, get him released, and give him his freedom back.
Now that is a perfect picture of what Jesus has done for us. We were, the Bible says, sold as slaves to sin. Through our sins we had run up a debt we could never begin to pay. We were people who, as another verse says, who were held is slavery all their lives by the fear of death. But Jesus became our relative. He took on human flesh and blood and became our rich brother and he bought us back. He paid the price to buy us out of slavery. He gave himself as a hostage to death, so that we could be released. Then he rose from the dead and destroyed death forever.

It is as Luther says in explanation of 2nd Article: [Jesus] has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. This is most certainly true. You can say that, too. It is most certainly true. You can say it and be glad.

A child of God, whom Christ has redeemed, can be happy. You can be happy even when you are not having fun. You can smile even if you do not get that one special present this year. After all, you have already been given the one perfect gift. God gave that gift to you when he sent his Son, Jesus. That gift keeps on giving. The gift of Jesus is forgiveness and salvation; and there we find a real reason for lasting joy.

So, you can be happy - deeply, profoundly happy - because of what the Lord has done for you. You have joy: the joy the Lord is coming brings to the whole world. So smile and enjoy him this Christmas and always. Amen.

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