HAVE A RADICAL CHRISTMAS

1. Rooted deep in our hearts
2. Filled with radical joy

You see many changes at this time of the year, even radical transformations. Furniture is moved. Trees go up. Colorful packages appear. Decorations and lights change the way things look both day and night. Even the smells in our homes are different. Cookies and baked goods, pine needles and candles, their fragrances mixing in the air. How radically different our homes are! And if you go out shopping, what changes there as well!

But come December 26, you will start seeing stripped Christmas trees by the curb. Soon our homes will look like they did before. As different as everything looks now, it is only on the surface. As radical as the change appears, it is not deep down.

But radical really means to go deeper, down to the roots. The word radical comes from the Latin word for root. In our text Isaiah describes radical change, not simple a change of appearance, but a change in the very nature of things: the deadly, dry impassible desert bursting forth with life, becoming a highway. This pictures the radical change Jesus brings to us, a change that goes down deep to very roots of our heart and soul and does not revert back when December 26 comes along. Let me wish you a radical Christmas, filled with radical joy.

I have admit, I have not been feeling all that joyful lately. So many things to do and so little time to do them. The stresses of the season, busyness of year, end-of-year finances. You have shared seasonal stresses. You know how hard it can be to feel joyful. And even if we manage some happy feelings now, after Christmas the post-Christmas blues can hit hard. We can feel like a dry desert, a wilderness, a barren wasteland.

But what does Isaiah write? The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. like the crocus (we might say like the rose) will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The names Lebanon, Mt Carmel, and the plain of Sharon - places of thick forests or lush flowers - just the opposite of a desert. What a radical change!

How does that joy come? They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God, Isaiah writes. The glory of the Lord – that is what brings radical joy.

But what is the glory of the Lord? Think of the Christmas account recorded by Luke, those passages you learned for your Christmas Eve program as a child: An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

The glory of the Lord is the saving work that Jesus Christ came do, his work that saves you. Isaiah, as well, points us to that saving work to strengthen us when joy seems gone and fear and uncertainty plague us, sapping the strength fr us. He writes: 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. The glory of the Lord is that he comes to save you. His vengeance and retribution put an end to his enemies,
defeating them, triumphing over them, giving you the victory, giving you that radical joy.

But do we look to the glory of the Lord, to his saving work, for our joy? That is where I so often go wrong. I build my joy on the hope of my family appreciating me or others praising me. I build my joy on being the one that can solve the problem, the one whom others depend on. But that joy quickly withers when times are dry and my own failures are so apparent. You see, rather than rejoicing in the glory of the Lord, I have been looking for joy in my own glory.

What blocks your view of the glory of the Lord? Where do you look to find joy? Do you try to make your joy grow by watering it with knowing that your friends accept you or that your family loves you or that others need you? Do you try to make it grow by watering it as you run after good times or pursue success in life or seek contentment in your home or chase whatever will spic up some excitement? But joy watered with these things will wither and die. It is not a radical joy. It is not a change that goes down to the very roots of our being, no matter how deeply we think we feel it at the time.

How can radical joy become rooted in my heart, in your heart? I need the Lord to lay bare just how radical a change he worked in me. That means admitting how bad off I was - how needy, how desperate, how lost! What a desert my heart and soul once were! I do not like facing that, and you do not like facing that in yourself either, do you? But you and I were blind to the goodness of God. We were deaf to his Word. When our conscience heard his holy will pointing out sin, we imagined him to be a killjoy, tormenting us with his rules, not letting us do what we want, terrifying us with his threats. Like a cripple, we could not come to him because we hated him and wanted to run the other way. Like a desert we were dry and dead in sin.

But to such blind, deaf, crippled sinners, like you and me, God freely, graciously chose to reveal his saving glory. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 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. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunt where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

Do you think the blind or crippled would be all that joyful when they were healed if they thought that they deserved to be healed, that it was there right and due, that God and the world owed it to them to make things right? No, there would be no radical joy, maybe just some outward show of pretend thanks.

You and I in no way deserve God's spiritual healing. Feel the burning sand of your sins. Thirst for what only your God can give, undeserving tho we are. And drink in his living water. He opens your ears to hear the good news: Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. He takes away your sins. He quenches your thirst. He opens your eyes to see God's saving glory. He unlooses your tongue to shout with joy and praise your Savior-God.

That good news is what roots radical joy in our hearts, for it changes us. It changes us from the inside out. It does not simply decorate us up but works a fundamental, radical change. Instead of the dry, dead desert of sin that was your soul, you have become the majestic forests and lush meadows of our God, watered with those glad tidings, poured out on us richly through his Word and Sacraments. Instead of wandering aimless toward a dreary death and a torturous hell, there is the highway of our God, the Way of Holiness. This as well brings us radical joy at Christmas.
But once again this joy comes only when we realize why even people like you and me journey on that highway. This is the way of holiness, no one unclean, dirtied by sin, can travel it. So why us? The troubles of this life cannot not devour us on this journey. There is no lion or ferocious beast; rather, our God protects us even in the darkest dangers. But why does he do that for us sinners?

Listen again to Isaiah: 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. 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, and the ransomed of the Lord will return.

Why you and me? Only because that baby born as our Brother came to redeem you, to ransom you with his blood. Yes, he did that even for you. You see, by his innocent death on the cross, by his holy, precious blood, by his divine sacrifice, he paid the ransom for all sinners - for you, for me, for all.

That is why your faith rejoices with confidence that Jesus is your Ransom, your Redeemer. If he paid the price for all, that must include you as well. And he did pay it for all. What radical joy grows from this faith, your faith! Not a changeable, shallow joy, but a joy rooted deep in you, growing out of your faith.

This radical joy looks past the things of this earth. Yes, the good things that God blesses us with in this life certainly are to be enjoyed by us, family and friends, food and celebration. But they are not our source of joy. Jesus, our Ransom, our Redeemer, is. And what of those sinful things that our natural self wants to rejoice in? Yes it does pain and sadden our old self as we say no them. That old self puts up a fight, tempting and luring and tripping us up so that we fall and wonder if we will ever make it to heaven.

But then look into the manger. That baby's blood washes you clean. He came to die for you. He is your Ransom, your Redeemer. That Baby picks you up and sets you again on the Way of Holiness, for he is the way, the truth, and the life. That Baby carries you in his arms, holding you in his nail-pierced hands, to bring you to the new Jerusalem, to Zion, to heaven. There your joy will blossom in all its fullness. 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. What radical joy!

So rather than a merry Christmas, I wish you a radical Christmas, a Christmas that changes you and me so that joy is rooted deep in our hearts. Find that joy, not in the trappings and happenings that so quickly disappear. Find that Joy lying in manger, your heavenly Savior, your divine Redeemer. Amen.

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