

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Second Sunday in Advent, December 6, 2020

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 70, 69:1, 72, 65, 73:5.

Lessons: Isaiah 34:1-15, James 5:7-11, Matthew 11:2-15.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 35:1-10

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltritt

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What a marvelous picture! Especially for people whose nation has been oppressed and whose people have been suffering. And of course, you know that all suffering ultimately is a result of sin in the world. Sometimes we bring it upon ourselves, but much of what we suffer is not a result of our personal actual sins, but of inherited, original sin.

I think that most of you have seen lush, beautiful gardens. And I think that most of you have seen desert-like places, too, places where you would not think that a beautiful garden would grow. The contrast between two such places is the picture you find in our sermon text.

This is the picture of change. This is the kind of drastic change that occurs when Jesus first comes into one's life and is most obvious when someone comes to faith as an adult. But this is also the kind of change that can occur when we receive a spiritual recharging, when we are encouraged in our spiritual lives. It is the kind of change that can occur when we become enthusiastic about God, about his Word, and what he has done for us. The way these kinds of change occur is when we hear or read God's Word. That might happen by reading something in Holy Scripture which especially inspires or encourages us. That might also happen by hearing an especially inspiring sermon, or hearing sacred music. All these kinds of things can touch our emotions, or feelings. But the feelings aren't the important thing. The important thing is the content of what we hear. We learn from Scripture itself that The Word of God is living and powerful. ***"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess."*** (Hebrews 4:12-14 NIV)

But Isaiah isn't just giving us a garden tour. He is pointing forward to the Savior, Jesus Christ, who would be born some 700 years in the future. The book of Isaiah is filled with pictures that look forward to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Savior and to the glories of heaven, beginning on the Day of Judgment.

Because that Savior came to earth as a true human being and as the true Son of God, he wants to come into the hearts of men. He rules in the hearts of all believers now, while we are on earth, and he will rule all things directly when we are taken to heaven to live with him eternally.

Please listen as we are reminded that

CHRIST'S KINGDOM IS A GLORIOUS KINGDOM!

- 1. God uses the picture of a desert transformed into a garden.**
- 2. Jesus, our Savior, comes and brings healing from sin and brings joy.**

In this chapter we have a beautiful and majestic picture of the flourishing condition of Christ's kingdom, of the glorious future awaiting those who belong to the mountain of Zion, the redeemed of the Lord, that is, the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.

In the previous chapter we read about burning sulfur, blazing pitch, thorns, nettles and brambles. In this chapter we read about blossoms, splendor, bubbling water, and green grass. What a contrast!

“The desert and the parched land will be glad”. What formerly was a moral wilderness would be totally changed, and we read in some translations: ***“the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.”*** We see here the picture of a desert blooming. Perhaps you have seen films or videos of time-lapse photography of an actual desert blooming at the beginning of the rainy season. But this is not just a physical change in the outward landscape.

We would like to think that our faith would always be constant, and our excitement about the Gospel of Jesus Christ is always at a high level. But the devil, the world, and even our own sinful flesh within us all conspire to take away the joy of our salvation. That is why we regularly sing after the sermon: ***“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.”*** (Psalms 51:10-12 KJV) We ask God daily to restore the joy of our salvation, to take away our discouragement and depression, to give us joy in our lives. And what better way to do that at home than reading Words from God in the Bible? Read especially in the Psalms, read in the New Testament especially for comfort, for joy, for the knowledge of our salvation!

“The wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus [or like the rose] it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon” We see a picture from nature of places that at one time were lush, beautiful places. But another desert place – our sinful hearts – will rejoice in God our Savior because of the faith that God causes to grow there. Isaiah gives the pictures of the glory of Lebanon with its mighty forests, and Mount Carmel, the mountain famed for its lush beauty, and Sharon, the valley south of Carmel, famed for its luxurious vegetation. The one who has come to faith ***“will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.”*** One of the things Isaiah was pointing forward to was the coming of the Messiah – and we celebrate his birth in about two and a half weeks. It also happens when the believer sees again in Scripture, in the Word of God, all that God has done for him or her.

“The glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God” are things that will be seen by all men on judgment day. They will be viewed with horror and terror by all who rejected Jesus Christ, and they will be seen with great joy and happiness by believers.

In the words of our text, the prophet Isaiah offers words of cheer and comfort to the believers, for those who are afflicted by their sins and troubled by all the world around us. ***“Strengthen the feeble hands.”*** This is a reference to the firm grasp with which believers should hold to the hope of their calling. ***“Steady the knees that give way.”*** Help them so that they will stand upright, keeping their ground against all enemies.

“Say to those with fearful hearts,” hearts terrified by the dangers around them on every hand, ***“be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”*** God will come to avenge his children upon their enemies. Now that will finally happen on judgment day, when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead, to punish his enemies according to what they deserve. In punishing the enemies of his people the Lord delivers and saves those who are his.

How often don't we read the words ***“do not fear”***, “don't be afraid” in Scripture! Shepherds heard them at Jesus' birth, too.

“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.” Jesus physically did all these kinds of things while he was on earth. But it is the spiritual blindness of natural man that will be changed by the Word of God, by the light of the Gospel. In this way people will be able to see the beauty of the Savior. The Word of God will come into hearts so that those who have never understood the message of salvation will hear and believe it. Those who are unable to walk the way of God's commandments because of sin which clings to us will ***“leap like a deer,”*** in eager willingness to follow the will of the Lord. The silent tongue that did not follow Christ, who knew nothing of the Gospel before its conversion and therefore confessed nothing will join in hymns of thanksgiving to the God of man's salvation.

Isaiah's pictures of water in the desert show us an oasis of the Lord in the midst of a world filled with hatred toward him.

In Isaiah's day roads were simple paths. But God's road-building plan will make highways out of those paths. God's Word will pave the way. Isaiah later tells us: ***"Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."*** Isaiah 40:4 (NIV)

This will be a special highway: ***"it will be called the Way of Holiness"*** where the saints of the Lord will be found. We read that ***"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."*** Not everyone can travel on this road. The unclean, the unbelievers, cannot travel on this highway to eternal life. It is only for the holy people of God, only those consecrated by the Lord.

But how can this be? How can anyone become holy and walk on this road? Certainly not by human effort. No human is born holy and no human can achieve holiness. Instead we are all dead in our transgressions and sins as the Scriptures clearly teach, and as our consciences bear witness to.

Yet those who walk on the way of holiness are the redeemed and ransomed of God. They have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus. God declared them holy by grace so they can walk on the highway to heaven. God redeemed us not with gold or silver ***"but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."*** 1 Peter 1:18-19 (NIV) Those who travel on the highway are the saints of God, the believers in the Savior. The Lord has washed you clean and forgiven all your sins – that's you, O Child of God!

And this road leads to heaven. ***"It will be for those who walk in that Way."*** That is all who have, by the grace of God, found the way of sanctification. ***"Wicked fools will not go about on it."*** The wicked who think themselves greater than God will not be there. Every one who walks on this way is under the special protection of God.

"But only the redeemed will walk there," that is, those who have accepted the redemption of God in Christ Jesus and rely upon it in firm faith. ***"And the ransomed of the LORD will return."*** Those whom the Messiah has delivered from the natural slavery of sin and from the consequent condemnation of death ***"will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads."*** This joy becomes visible in their entire life. ***"Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."***

Because true Christianity is the only religion of grace, of God's undeserved love and mercy, and not a religion of laws that we must obey to earn our salvation, it is a cheerful religion. It alone announces to sinners the full and free love of God in Christ Jesus. In the fullest sense of the word this chapter is a genuine Messianic prophecy. These words can be applied wherever the kingdom of Christ is established in the hearts of those who believe.

The Advent message and the Christmas message is first and foremost the Gospel. ***"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved."*** Mark 16:16 (KJV) Jesus Christ came to earth to die for sinners, so ***"that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*** John 3:16 (NIV)

All believers will see everlasting joy. The wearisome journey will become only a faint memory as the gladness and joy of heaven overtake and overwhelm those who enter this blessed city of God. Sorrow and sighing will disappear. The trouble and sadness believers experience in this life are incompatible with the glory that awaits all believers in the eternal city of God. Singing will take the place of sorrow. The joy is not temporary but everlasting.

What a glorious picture Isaiah painted for his people and for God's people of all time. And the way? Remember that Jesus is the only way to this highway of eternal life! He assures us: ***"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*** John 14:6 (NIV)

May we all ***"enter Zion with singing; everlasting ...Gladness and joy!"*** Isaiah 35:10 (NIV) Amen.