

NOTE: Attached back to back here are two sermons. On Saturday evening we held our second annual “Service of Remembrance.” This is a service particularly designed to help those who grieve the passing of a loved one to “deal” with the holiday season. Immediately after that you will find the sermon preached earlier Saturday evening and on Sunday morning for the Second Sunday in Advent. Also, our video equipment did not cooperate this week and we have no video of either of these two sermons.

“THE WORLD SAYS: ‘JOY!’ WE SAY: ‘PLEASE GO AWAY!’”

Sermon Text – Various
Sat., Dec. 9, 2017
Service of Remembrance
Zion Lutheran Church, Beecher, IL
Scripture Readings – Various

In the name of Jesus. [Amen.]

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Dr. Seuss’s classic book: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* is a book about a figure – the Grinch – who’s a “holiday-dreader.”

And you *know*... don’t you... what a “holiday-dreader” is. A “holiday-dreader” is one... who’d simply rather skip those days from mid-November through about, say... January 10th.

And... those around the “holiday-dreaders...” after a while... look at them as was the Grinch portrayed in the movie... they’re sour-souled sad sacks... who are nothing but downers & “buzz-kills” for every Cindy Lou and Tiny Tim around them... those others... who have nothing but eager holiday hopes.

But... there’s some truth to that stereotype... isn’t there?

That’s because there really *are* a fair number of “holiday-dreaders” aren’t there? Perhaps your presence here tonight... is positive proof of that fact... for you, yourself... may be one of them.

You know how it is... You try not to be noticed when it happens... but an almost imperceptible wince is seen on your face... every time someone has the audacity to mention *those* words that at one time in your life gave you so much joy... but now... well... not so much.

Those words:

- “Thanksgiving...”
- “Christmas...” *and*...
- “New Years.”

Yeah... it’s the utter truth... Your heart isn’t two sizes *too small*... uh uh! In reality... your heart *is broken!*

At this time of year... when the time for family... & mirth... & joy-to-the-world draws near... you brace yourself for *another* onslaught of tears, anxiety, & anguish of the soul. For you... the holidays bring the grim reminder that someone... or *several* loved ones... who you still consider to be precious... are now gone from your life... and this time of year... makes that fact... to be a bitter reality... nearly *every* moment of *every* day.

Frankly... it seems... that everyone else’s gain of gifts & lights & happy parties... only serves to highlight your loss. Yeah... the hand you once held... is now gone. The hopes you carried in your heart have disappeared. Your ability to find pure joy in carefree moments... well... *that’s* long gone! And in its place... is seemingly oppressive & ever-present heartbreak.

But, hear this... you dear “holiday-dreaders:” The surprising reality... & this way too well-kept secret... is that the holidays... are more for *you* than anyone else!

The word “holiday” has sacred roots. It’s a shorthand way of saying two words at once. Those two words? “Holy Day.”

The word “holy” literally means “set apart.” So... a “holiday” is truly... a day that’s “set apart” from all other days.

Holidays are sacred days... sacred times. Holidays are bigger than us... for they’re rooted in the Divine! They’re days & times when the holy, almighty Lord of the Universe... meets you *exactly* where you’re at... and they’re *not* occasions set up... to see how much fun you’re capable of having. Uh uhhh!

Rather... in love... God, Himself... meets you where you’re at... in order to bring His grace... His strength... and His consolation into *your life* as it really is.

These holidays... or more correctly said... these “holy days” that are now upon us... well... they’re God’s gift to us... so that we might see & experience... the presence of God in our lives – *no matter* what we’re going through at the time!

Yeah... the Lord of All... is closer to you than you can imagine. How did St. John describe this fact for us: **“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.”** (John 1:14)

That’s what the Christian Church celebrates at *every* holiday... the very real fact... that God is with us always... to enhance our joy... and to temper our sadness as we live our lives.

As we take a serious look at this struggle called “life...” we learn that our deepest need... *isn’t* for one more party... which, by the way... often turns out pretty lame anyway... our deepest need... is for God to draw near and embrace us!

Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 when He stated the purpose for His being born of Mary in Bethlehem: **“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.”** (Isaiah 61:1 ESV)

This is *exactly* what happened at Christmas. Our of compassion for us... God in Christ Jesus... has heard our cries and He *personally*... has come to earth to save us. (Exodus 3:7-8)

If you’re here this evening... you know *exactly* what it’s like... to sit in the darkness... and to try to catch your breath from grief & loss. You know *exactly* what it’s like... to feel the tears well up – *again!* – while seemingly everyone else in the whole world... laughs with friends and seems to be having nothing but an absolutely perfect time.

But dear people... it’s into those very dark & lonely places that God comes to you... and whispers His soul embracing promises. And in those promises... He lets you know that **“the Word that became flesh...”** is His very own Son, Jesus. He... is God’s Christmas present to you!

And that Present... will never wear out or lose it’s luster! In fact... the gift of His Son... the Babe of Bethlehem... will endure throughout time... and into eternity!

Yeah... perhaps *this* Christmas... during these upcoming “holy days...” perhaps more than ever before in your entire life... you’ll see that the true “spirit” of Christmas... *isn’t* what we humans do at this time of year.

No! Parties... food... presents... sooner or later... we see them for what they are – only a diversion from reality. But in Jesus Christ... we have true Joy... and we can rightly say: “Joy to the world...” *and* “Joy to ME...” for the Lord has come to give me **“rest for my soul”** (Mt. 11:29, ESV)... **“to bind up my broken heart”** (Is. 61:1, ESV)... and to free me from captivity to grief & sorrow. (cf. Is. 61:1)

Yes! Just as this Baby Jesus would later stretch out His arms on the holy cross to suffer & die for all your sins... so does He *here & now* stretch out His arms to you... seeking to embrace you with His compassion, understanding, & unending love!

So... dear friends... peel back the human invented holiday hubbub... and you'll see Jesus right there. He gives you perspective of what this season is *really* all about.

If you've been a "holiday-dreader..." take heart. These upcoming "holy days" are meant to wrap you in hope. The Gift you *really* need has never been closer!

Thanks be to God! [Amen.]

2ND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Sermon Text – Mark 1:1-8
Sat. & Sun., Dec. 9 & 10, 2017
2nd Sunday in Advent, Series B
Zion Lutheran Church, Beecher, IL
Old Testament Reading – Isaiah 40:1-11
Epistle Reading – 2 Peter 3:8-14
Gospel Reading – Mark 1:1-8

In the name of Jesus. [Amen.] Our sermon is based on today's Gospel reading, and particularly these words: **The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, ³the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"**

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

The following story is supposedly true.

A first year seminary student was in a Lutheran church in South St. Louis. The seminary had assigned him to attend this church each week. He was to observe and gain experience toward becoming a pastor, himself.

One day... *during* the singing of the closing hymn... two ladies walked up the aisle... went to the altar... took the flowers... and left in a hurry. The young man thought to himself: **"This must be a St. Louis Lutheran custom. I've never seen anything like this before."**

He watched each week. The same two ladies did this every Sunday.

Finally... after a few months... the young seminarian's curiosity... had piqued. He followed them out of church and asked one of the ladies: **"What do you do with those flowers each week?"**

She looked at him... and with a very matter-of-fact voice, replied: **"Young man, we take the flowers to the people who are sick after the sermon!"**

People get sick from sermons!

One Sunday... a pastor had what he thought... was a great idea! He determined to preach a bit on every book in the Bible – yeah... all 66 books!

Well... as you can imagine... the sermon went on and on – almost as long as do the sermons from: _____! Well... we won't go there...! 😊

After seemingly *forever*... the preacher finished the sermon with the book of Revelation. But... as he was wrapping that up... he realized that he bypassed the book of James. He told the congregation of his mistake and then asked: **"What am I going to do with James?"**

To that... one man in the back of the church shouted out: **"Pastor, you can give James my place. I'm going home!"**

People get sick from sermons!

Sermons... and anything to do with repentance... seem to make people sick! That's because "repentance" isn't very high on our list of fun things to think about... much less *do*.

Rather... “Comfort...” is what most people look for. “Comfort...” is that which seemingly consumes *everyone... all the time!* The pursuit of pleasure & “creature comforts...” is what gets our interest & keeps our attention.

Repentance... on the other hand... brings us face-to-face with the reality of our sinful brokenness. And repentance is a bitter reminder to us... of our abject inability to save ourselves.

Years ago, in another congregation...

- Young woman
- Began attending worship services
- Later told me that she almost quit coming to church.
- I asked her why that was... Didn't like the time of confession at the beginning of the service.
- I admired her honesty: **“I'm not *that* bad!”**

That element of our liturgy... took her out of her “comfort zone...” and she didn't like it!

In our Gospel reading... we see people flocking to see... *and hear...* John the Baptist. His was a voice **“crying in the wilderness...”**

Yes, John was literally in a desert wilderness... but so were the people drawn to him – even if they lived in seeming luxury... with all the creature comforts known to the world at that time! They knew that there was something missing in their lives... and in their search for that... God led them to hear the Baptist's words.

John called them to **“prepare”** their hearts to receive true, real, and lasting “comfort.” And that preparation specifically called for them to repent... and live a life of repentance... that is, to recognize their sins... to be sorry for them... and to have a desire to *want* to do better. In other words... to recognize that only by being “right” with God... by being “one” with Him... could they attain true comfort for themselves.

You've seen it for yourself... since the Fall into sin... mankind has been seeking to find true, lasting comfort & peace in this world on its own.

One such effort is known as the “Soul Movement.” Searching the internet... I found one such group in Canada. To see how they're seeking comfort and peace... listen to this invitation to their upcoming New Year's Eve party three weeks from tonight:

This New Years Eve, we rejoice and bring in 2018 in a nourishing, intimate healing space. We will set intentions, we will connect with each other, we will dance, heal and express ourselves. We will let go of all that has burdened us and held us back. We will let go of all that does not serve us, and purge any limiting beliefs. With our renewed perspective, our reality will shift to heights we have never perceived before... The energy of 2018 is cosmically aligned to catapult our ideas and initiatives to manifest powerfully into reality. Together, let us prepare to fully step into our power as we welcome 2018...

Keeping with the Soul Movement tradition, we turn down the music just before midnight as we prepare to welcome 2018 in absolute stillness. A soothing shamanic sound bath with angelic vocals and a guided meditation will take you on an inward journey and help you re-connect with your intentions and positive thoughts for the brand new year ahead. Through group intentions and powerful guided chants, we will amplify our collective energies and intentions and send powerful ripples to the Universe to manifest our dreams in the brand new year. <https://www.meetup.com/Soul-Movement/events/245155119/>

In a way... you can't blame them. They're looking for help & hope... as they usher in the New Year that's just around the corner. They know that they want something better... *much better...* than what 2017 had given them.

But... you saw it... didn't you? They're still falling into the same lie that Satan had foisted upon Adam and Eve. That lie? **“You will be like God.”** (Gen. 3:5, ESV)

Yeah... like Adam and Eve... those poor, misguided people... are turning *inward*... toward themselves... rather than turning outward... toward God's call to repent... in order to receive that which will *really* help them – restoration with none other than their very Creator!

This is what Advent is all about. This... really... is what being a *Christian* is all about. God calls us to jettison our self-image that we're "basically a good person..." and see ourselves for what we really *are*... utter sinners in desperate need of a Divine Savior!

And in Advent... we see the beginning of that in God sending His Son into the fallen "wilderness" of this sinful world... to redeem us "**poor, sinful beings.**" (*Confession, Lutheran Service Book*, p. 184.)

And... no... it's not fun – *at all* – to confess the bitter truth about oneself. But... what comes after that... is the greatest! Yeah... it more than makes up for the need to confess one's sins!

Following the Confession... God's repentant ones hear God... using the voice of the pastor... tell them words of "comfort" that have their origin in heaven! Speaking as God's servant... the pastor says: "**...in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**"

And to that... those who believe almost shout it: "**Amen!**" they gladly say! For in that moment... they hear again where true comfort can only be found in this fallen world.

God's forgiveness is given to them in Jesus... who came to die & rise three days later... to restore the severed relationship between them & God!

In your Baptism... God called you to be his daughter or son. There He bathed you... *not* with a "**soothing shamanic sound bath with angelic vocals...**" as do the misguided Soul Movement people believe will actually help them.

No! In your holy Baptism... that has an origin in heaven... God makes you to be His very own. He puts His holy name on you marking you as His very own. And through *that*... you draw blessed comfort that extends throughout time... & into eternity!

The owner of a greenhouse hired a man to take care of his plants. He proved to be a great worker... but the plants began to die.

The owner then put a more experienced gardener in charge of the greenhouse. Soon the plants were growing larger and healthier than ever!

The owner was puzzled. He asked the new gardener: "**What made the difference?**"

The new man explained: "**When the previous man moved the plants, he was too gentle with them. I was rough with them. I disturbed their roots. Plants flourish when you shake them up at their roots.**"

Dear Christians... that's what John the Baptist does to all people of all eras... he speaks for God... & disturbs us to our innermost fiber... to see our sin... and then see our Savior! And in seeing Him... we flourish... we thrive... we dwell in comfort... certain that our eternal destiny is secure... in the Baby of Bethlehem... and the Christ of Calvary – God's Son, our Savior!

For Jesus' sake... an in His holy name. [Amen.]

May the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. [Amen.]