

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
December 27, 2009  
First Sunday after Christmas  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 61:10-62:3  
Psalm 147  
Galatians 3:23-4:7  
John 1:1-18

Statistically speaking, this Sunday is usually one of the least attended Sundays of the year in terms of church attendance. Various reasons may account for this.

It may be that families are still traveling or returning from their travels on this day.

In some places the weather may play a factor.

And there may also be an emotional or spiritual reason. Once Christmas day is over, persons sometimes experience a great “letdown,” a collective sigh that comes after weeks of frenetic activity. A great deal of the time, this would be natural, for all of that frenetic activity is structured by the culture and the merchants such that Christmas day is the *culmination*, the end of that activity. And once the end happens, then it’s time to catch your breath.

But in the Christian calendar, Christmas is not the culmination, but the beginning, of something. The Christmas season *begins* on December 25, rather than ending on December 25. It runs for twelve days until the Feast of the

Epiphany on January 6. The birth of Christ means then, that the party is just beginning, just getting underway.

And perhaps nothing symbolizes the essence of a party more than a wedding. A wedding is one of the few remaining occasions for which most everyone dresses up. A wedding is the epitome of celebration and joy, the essence of festivity.

It is not surprising, then, that Isaiah speaks of God's work to bring salvation and deliverance to the people in images of the wedding. The theme is one of overwhelming joy.

And with good reason. For Christmas heralds a remarkable transformation. It speaks forth the news that Christ is born, that we have been forgiven, that we have been set free and dressed in new clothes of salvation and righteousness. In the birth of Christ, God takes the smelly rags of shepherds and the swaddling clothes of a child in Bethlehem and fashions a wedding dress of salvation and righteousness for all humankind. The birth of Christ proclaims with power that God loves us, God accepts us, and God forgives us.

Our response to this -- if it parallels that of Isaiah -- is overwhelming joy. We are overcome with joy that God would visit us in this way, that God would send his only-begotten Son to be born and to live among us and to reclaim us for himself.

We are overwhelmed with joy that the God of the universe would take on human form, would take our sin upon himself so that we might be forgiven and made new. Overwhelmed with joy that he came to pay a debt he did not owe because we owed a debt we could not pay. Overwhelmed because when we deserved to be confined to the dungeon of our own despair, instead we were invited to a wedding.

But in the midst of being overwhelmed with joy that Jesus has come to us, there is a great irony in all of this that John, in his Gospel, will not let us forget. John tells us in verse 10: “but although the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him when he came.”

What an irony. The Light of the world has come. The One who makes the unknowable God known to us has arrived. And yet the world does not recognize him at his coming. The world is unable to discern the light as it shines into the darkness.

It can be tempting for us to think that John’s words are addressed to “others,” that the spiritual blindness he describes applies only to “those out there” who are not believers, those who have not “seen the light” like we have. After all, we have prepared for his coming. We have anticipated his coming. We have longed for his arrival.

We have images in our minds now of how things are supposed to be, of how *he* is supposed to be among us. Surely our spiritual vision is spot on, right?

As we find ourselves reflecting on John's words to us in the Gospel, is it possible that those "out there" are not the only ones who struggle to recognize the Light of Christmas?

Gospel artist Wayne Watson asks this question of himself with these words:

*Would I know You now if You walked into the room  
If you stilled the crowd--If Your light dispelled the gloom?  
And if I saw Your wounds--Touched Your thorn pierced brow,  
I wonder if I'd know You now.*

*Would I know You now if You walked into this place  
Would I cause You shame--Would my games be Your disgrace?  
Or would I worship You--Fall down upon my face  
I wonder if I'd know You now.*

*Or have the images I've painted so distorted who You are  
That even if the world was looking they could not see You--The real You?  
Have I changed the true reflection to fulfill my own design  
Making You what I want, not showing You forth divine?*

*Would I miss You now if You left and closed the door  
Would my flesh cry out "I don't need You anymore"?  
Or would I follow You--Seek to be restored...  
I wonder--will I ever learn?*

*I wonder--would I know You now?* [From the Album, *Watercolor Ponies*]

Christmas, then, offers us both an irony and a challenge. The *irony* of Christmas is that as the Light comes to the world, the world does not see or recognize the Light.

The *challenge* of Christmas -- and all that follows for us -- is to let that Light shine forth in our lives so strongly and so brightly, that the world cannot help but see it.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, it is apparent to me that the words of the collect for today are true of each of you. The Light of God's Incarnate Word has been kindled in *your* hearts. It is shining unmistakably on *your* faces. The light of Christmas is shining forth through *you*.

So come to the Table today with joy. Receive the grace he offers, and take the Light of the season with you as you go.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.