The Gift of Good News

First in the 2018 Advent/Christmas series, “Gifts of Grace”

# Scripture: Isa. 52:4-10; 61:1-4; Matt. 1:18-25

# Key Thought: One precious Gift of Grace is the Good News which brings Hope.

# Intro:

I would like to begin today with a short piece of historical fiction. The short story is set over 2500 years ago in Babylon. Asaph was 14 years old, but he seemed older as he lay on his sleeping mat. He could not hold back the tears. He tried to keep busy during the day, carrying bricks for his Babylonian taskmaster’s so he wouldn’t have time to remember. But now, as he tried to sleep, the memories flooded in. The scab on his right wrist itched. It was healing now. Just a few weeks ago it had been raw and bloodied from the constant wearing of the iron manacle which had chained him to others of his fellow countrymen on the long trek from his home in Israel to exile in this foreign land. Asaph fell chills all over again as he heard the irons of bondage clang in his memory. He remembered how his baby sister had been killed; how his father had been tortured, his mother’s clothes ripped. His tears flowed freely now. Just today he thought he saw his brother, but he wasn’t sure. Asaph buried his face in his hands. Everything looks so bleak. But there was one thing he remembered that had made him stop to think. Today he had heard a message that had come to the captives from the prophet Isaiah. It was a strange message for such terrible times. But it had been a bright ray of hope. Isaiah had written to them. What was that he had said? (Read Isa. 52:4-10; 61:1-4)

Asaph listened simply because the message was from Isaiah. Isaiah was a man of God and everyone knew it. He had foretold the deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib many years before. He had been God’s messenger to the sick king Hezekiah, sending a word that the king would recover, which he did. So, when Isaiah spoke, the people of Israel listened. They knew that Isaiah spoke true messages from God. Here in Babylon, where Asaph was exiled, one hardly ever heard about the God of Israel. All the talk was about all the idols of Babylon. There were thousands of them all around. Just today Asaph had been forced to carry bricks for yet another shrine. So, when Asaph heard something from God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, he was eager to listen.

(Pause)

Now I invite you to skip over 500 years of time and several hundred miles of near Eastern desert and set your minds down in the little town of Nazareth in the nation of Israel about 2000 years ago during the lifetime of Jesus. I will spin another historical fiction for you.

Simeon was a leather merchant in Nazareth. He wasn’t very prosperous. Demand for leather and for his services was low and business had been poor lately. Simeon was sitting in the synagogue as was his usual custom on the Sabbath. To be honest, his mind was elsewhere, wondering how he could make a little money, encourage a little more business for his trade. The Scripture was being read, and Simeon perked up a little bit as the carpenter’s oldest boy was chosen to read one of Simeon’s favorite passages;

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
 Luke 4:18-19 NIV

Simeon stared at Jesus. There was something different about the way he read the Scripture. He seemed to captivate you with every word. Then, the reading was finished. And Jesus said something, and Simeon did a double take in his mind. He had to re-run what Jesus had said to make sure he had heard it right. “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!” (Luke 4:21)

Simeon blinked, and then he blurted out, almost stammering, “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?”

(Pause)

The words of Jesus, when he took the announcement of good news from Isaiah, and applied it to himself, came as a surprise to the people of the synagogue of Nazareth. But Jesus had come to bring Good News to Simeon’s generation too! But what about today? The good news that Jesus came to bring is even more needed today.

# Who needs the message of Good News and Hope?

Everyone needs the Gospel message of Good News and Hope that Jesus came to bring. But not everyone is looking for it.

The original verse in Isaiah 61, written by Isaiah, was intended for poor, brokenhearted, mourning captives such as Asaph. The word used can have to do with being depressed or oppressed or impoverished. How is it relevant to us?

I just read this week in online news that life expectancy in the United States declined again this last year. The number one contributor to the decline was increased rate of suicide. Another contributor was drug-related deaths. Both of these are symptoms of increased hopelessness in our country. People don’t know where to go for good news and hope. Jesus Christ offers us both if we will turn to him. The question is, are we looking in the right place for good news?

## Good News for the poor in spirit

The Bible is clear that the good news is for those who are poor in spirit. Those who are proud, arrogant, and confident in their own virtues do not think they need the good news Jesus came to bring. When Jesus spoke to the self-confidence and self-righteous Pharisees at one point, he said to them,

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Mark 2:17 NRSV

Did Jesus mean that the Pharisees did not need good news? Of course not. What he meant was that their hearts were not in an attitude to receive good news.

## Good News for sinners

Sometimes we need Good News because our sins weigh heavily upon us. That was the case for David in Psalm 51 where he wrote:

“My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.” Ps 51:17 NIV

## Good News for the broken-hearted

Sometimes we need the message of hope because of circumstances beyond our control. Sometimes we are desperate for hope because of troubles in our lives. To anyone whose future seems gray at best. To those who are the victims of injustice. To those whose closest relationship are turning sour – to all of you God is still there for you too. This was David’s kind of situation in Psalm 34

“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”
Ps 34:18 NIV

Think about how Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount? What kind of attitude of soul was he hoping for in his followers?

 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Matt 5:3-5 NIV

So. while the whole race needs the Good News of Hope that Jesus brings, it is especially for those who know they need it.

## Good News for the captives

According to the message that God gave to Isaiah, there Good News and Hope at Christmas for the captive too. We are not captives in chains in the same way that the people had been to whom the original message was sent. Yet who could deny that people today are still captive in so many ways. Addictions are a huge problem in our country today-- alcohol, gambling, pornography – to name just a few. These are complicated problems involving wrong choices as well as elements of disease.

Those who are trapped in unhealthy and sinful choices, Paul wrote,

Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. Rom 6:16-18 NIV

## Good News for the blind

There surprising note of hope in these verses also for the blind. When Jesus was on earth, he brought physical eyesight to those who were blind. It has been easy for Christians to understand through the centuries that Jesus ministry of giving physical sight was a parable of his ministry of giving spiritual sight to those who are spiritually blind. Without God’s hep we do not recognize our spiritual situation. Paul wrote,

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 2 Cor. 4:4

# Who sends the message of Good News and Hope?

A key fact for us to understand is who sends the message?

Isaiah said,

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of a messenger who proclaims peace, who brings good news!” (Isaiah 52:7)

It is the coming of Jesus at Christmas time that has brought to all of us Good News and Hope. Remember that in the account of the first Christmas, it says,

 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 that will cause great joy for all the people. Luke 2:9-10 NIV

Jesus said when he quoted the Isaiah passage in the Nazareth synagogue that he had come to proclaim Good News. He repeated that message later in the same chapter in Luke. After a long time at prayer, Jesus said to his disciples,

 “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” Luke 4:43 NIV

So why did Christmas happen? Why was Jesus sent to earth? So that the good news could come to us! That’s the Christmas connection. That is a gift that God sent to us with Jesus. It is a gift that waits for us to unwrap when we are ready to look up to God for new Hope.

And who brought the message? Jesus did! And his message was from his Father in heaven!

# What is the Good News that brings Hope?

## Emmanuel

In his book, “All I Want for Christmas” James W Moore tells a story of a missionary to Kenya who was given a Jeep to help him in his missionary rounds.

 “He used the Jeep as he went from village to village to preach, to teach the Scriptures, to help the people. However, after he had the Jeep for a few months, all of a sudden, it refused to start. He looked under the hood, but not knowing anything about automobile engines, he just presumed the battery was worn out. He found that he could get the Jeep started by getting some folks to give them a push. Or he could park it headed down the hill and rolled it off engaging the clutch. For two years, the missionary started the Jeep like that. When time came for his furlough, his replacement arrived, and the missionary showed his replacement how to start the Jeep by pushing it off or rolling it down the hill. The new missionary looked under the hood for a moment and then he said, “Dr., I think I see the problem. The battery cable has come loose from the starter.” The new missionary reached in, reconnected the loose cable, got in the driver seat, turned the key – and the engine roared to life.

In like manner, Christmas reconnects us to our power source. As we look forward to the birth of Jesus, we feel God come close and recognize that nothing else can fulfill our longing for a better world. The reminder of God’s presence ignites our faith and reinvigorates our life in Christ. One keyword, more than any other, captures how Christmas reconnects us and inspires our faith.” (James W. Moore p. 11, 12)

In the story we read this morning in the Gospel of Matthew, we learned that one of the names by which we know Jesus, is Emmanuel. Emmanuel means God is with us. What a word of hope that is; what Good News! During the time of Jesus ministry on earth, Jesus was in a very literal sense, “God with us.” After Jesus ascended to heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, to indwell our hearts. Since then, because of the Holy Spirit’s presence in us, we can still say with assurance that, “God is with us.” That is the first part of the Christmas Good News that brings Hope.

## Set Free

Secondly, to the captives, to the prisoners of sin and selfishness, Jesus brings good news of freedom. Jesus himself said, “If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed!” (John 8:36).

In the most famous of all Wesley hymns, “Oh For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” Charles Wesley wrote of Jesus, “He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free.” For the word “canceled” in that hymn, I think of how a check is canceled when it is paid. Then I think about how Jesus said upon the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). The Greek word there might also be translated, “It is paid.”

The Bible says that in the name of the one who came at Christmas, forgiveness of sins will be preached. John wrote about it;

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

## Healing

Christians have always heard in the gospel message a hope for healing. Is part of the gift in the glow of Christmas. There is a hope for the healing of broken hearts, that somehow as we come again to the manger to worship and remember how it began, the living and resurrected Jesus would bind up our wounds, comfort our hearts with his hope, and heal our bodies.

The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. Isa 53:5

## Peace

One of the most familiar lines of Christmas is the refrain of the angels on Christmas night, “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men” (Luke 2:14 KJV).

Repeatedly in the verses we have already quoted today, the word peace has appeared.

When Peter preached in the house of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, listen to how we characterized the message that he brought.

 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. Acts 10:36

Jesus bring us Good News of peace with God, reconciliation with others, and skills to be in relations well.

## Sight

Another facet of the Good News in Jesus relates to spiritual sight. Spiritual sight is the ability to recognize our own spiritual condition and what difference the life and message of Jesus can make in our life. Spiritual eyesight helps us to understand Jesus for who he is. Paul understood it this way.

 For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. 2 Cor 4:5-6 NIV

## Salvation

In the passage from Isaiah chapter 52 that we read, the Bible says that the messenger will proclaim the Good News of salvation. It is in the context of believing the message of salvation that Paul quotes from this chapter in Isaiah.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”
Rom 10:14-15 NIV

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah prophesied about the salvation that would come through the one that John the Baptist would announce.

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” Luke 1:76-79

The kind of sight that comes when we look to God for help is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit helps us to understand our own sinfulness, our own selfishness, our own unworthiness before God. But then the Holy Spirit shows us the remedy that God has provided. Jesus offers us forgiveness because of his death on the cross. The Holy Spirit points us to the Lamb that was slain for you and for me. It was not an accident that the birth of the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world was announced to the shepherds on the hillsides around Bethlehem who kept the sheep. Likely, many of the lambs of their flock were destined to be sin offerings in Jerusalem; offerings that were ultimately ineffective, offerings that would be replaced by the one true sacrifice, the death of the Lamb of God for us. This is why sometimes in Christmas displays you subtly see a cross in the background. It is to remind us that our salvation was the purpose for which Jesus came. That was the ultimate good news for us.

# Conclusion

There is a news article online right now headlined, how to celebrate Christmas without religion, which I suspect means without Jesus. I feel bad for the writer. They do not know what Wonderful Christmas Gifts of Grace they are missing. They are satisfied with the tinsel and trappings of the holiday but are missing the greatest gifts of all.

But this morning I invite you and me to open our hearts wide to receive God’s Gift of Good News for our souls needs for today, whatever those needs might be.