

Merry Christmas? As we gather here today, we might be asking ourselves this question. The usual greeting: “Merry Christmas!” Is replaced by a question mark. Merry Christmas? We ask.

No large family gatherings that usually mark the season. Merry Christmas? No holiday parties at work, at church, or in our various social clubs. Merry Christmas? Masks, social distancing, and missed opportunities in the year 2020. Merry Christmas?

I hate to burst the bubble. It’s always awkward to address the elephant in the room, but it’s probably safe to say that many of us come here tonight with heavy hearts, hopes disappointed, and anxiety about what is going to happen in the year to come.

Merry Christmas? It’s to this question that Isaiah the prophet replies with a resounding, “Merry Christmas!” He writes, “**The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.**”

Look at some of the words in this reading: “Joy, rejoice, joy, glad” These are the words to describe God’s people. The picture Isaiah paints is one of joy at a feast. Imagine the Christmas dinner of yore: the Christmas ham, eggnog and the smell of nutmeg drifting through the air, presents wrapped neatly under the tree and the kids back in town. That exact picture may not be your reality this year, but your Heavenly Father wants to instill this joy in your hearts this Christmas, even if the way you celebrate Christmas looks different this year than how you have in the past.

Merry Christmas! Isaiah gives us three reasons for your Christmas to be merry. First, 3. we can be merry this Christmas because our bonds have been broken. Isaiah, speaking to God, tells us be joyful because “...**the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.**” In this verse, Isaiah paints a picture of God’s people being under the cruel rule of a foreign power. But the Lord God will free them from that tyranny.

Now, not many of us can imagine being under the cruel rule of a foreign power. Maybe that’s not the takeaway point here tonight. Simply put, God promises us joy in freedom. Specifically, it is freedom from the tyranny of your fears, freedom from the tyranny of your destructive desires, freedom from sin!

You have freedom from the tyranny of your fears. Whatever your fears or anxieties that you may be bringing here today, the Lord, Your Heavenly Father, promises that He has overcome them. Fear of sickness? Fear of the future? Fear of

loneliness? Fear of suffering? All these fears your God knows, and He stills them. He breaks those things that weigh heavily on your back.

This past year has perhaps brought out the ugly side of all of us. We have been impatient, ornery, and at times plain mean. We have filled our hearts, minds, and souls with unreliable cures and unsatisfied desires. The Lord promises to break this rule oppressive rod, forgiving us of our sins and freeing us from our selfish desires. We have freedom from those fears, selfish desires, and sins that oppress us and scare us: that's one reason we can say, "Merry Christmas!"

On to our second point. 2. We can be merry this Christmas because our warfare is ended. Isaiah tells us that we can be joyful because **"...every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire."** In other words, the swords will be hammered into plowshares. The guns will be melted down. There will be peace on Earth!

Not many of us have experienced war and battle. We do not know the horrors and hardships brought on by warfare. But for an ancient person, to hear of a life without war and bloodshed would be a fantasy. How could that be real? Certainly, any instrument of war would need to be saved to protect from the next bad guy on the horizon!

In 2020 we've experienced our own hardships. It's not too far of a stretch to say that the world has been embroiled in a war. Not a war of guns and bombs, but a war of facemasks and physical distancing. The enemy is not other humans but a virus nanometers wide. The war has taken its toll, with hundreds of thousands of casualties in America alone. Wouldn't it be good news to hear that the war is over?

We can have joy this evening because the Lord promises that this war will be over. There will come a day—not today, not next month, but someday—that we will no longer have a need for cloth facemasks. One day they could be burned as fuel for the fire. The threat of COVID will subside. That's a reason to say, "Merry Christmas!"

But freedom and peace, how could this be? You might say, "I don't feel at peace." "I don't feel free." How will God make good on His promises? The third reason helps explain the first two. 1. We can be merry this Christmas because a child is born for us! Isaiah tells us that we can be joyful because **"...to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."** This child delivers to us the freedom and peace we so desperately desire.

You have a merry Christmas because Jesus is your wonderful counselor. This word “wonderful” is often translated elsewhere as wonder. The only person who can work these types of wonders is God Himself. We can have a merry Christmas because our wonder worker comes alongside us and brings us joy.

Jesus has worked many wonders in His earthly ministry, but the greatest of all is this, that on the cross, He has taken on your pains, sins, and sorrows. In exchange, He gives you His comfort, perfection, and joy. On the third day He rose again, promising that death no longer has power over you. Death, the worst a pandemic can deliver, has been overcome through Jesus Christ, the wonderful counselor.

From that lowly manger all the way to the cross—every step of the way—He has entered into our world filled with its sickness, brokenness, warfare, and violence, and He came to redeem it. This wonderful counselor worked wonders as He healed the sick, welcomed the downtrodden, and even healed those injured.

You have a merry Christmas because Jesus is your mighty God. This word “mighty” is better translated as mighty man of valor. Think Seal Team 6 or Delta Force. Your Savior isn’t a wimp but is strong to save—a little incongruous with a newborn in a manger.

God came to this Earth as a mighty man of valor, not to beat people up, but to overcome Satan. It is Satan and his reign that is a yoke of burden and a rod of oppression. By rising again on the third day, Jesus has defeated Satan and has given us freedom from the devil’s tyranny. Thus it is in the Christ-child alone that we have that freedom from fear, from our selfish desires, and from sin.

You have a merry Christmas because Jesus is your Everlasting Father. He comforts us like a father comforts His children. He is eternal. He is not going away, and the same Jesus who overcame Satan throughout His earthly ministry is our constant companion as we face sorrows, tribulations, and pains in the here and now.

You have a merry Christmas because Jesus is your Prince of Peace. The world around us may have wars and pandemics, persecution and upheaval, but the Prince of Peace brings you peace which the world cannot give. Peace beyond the joys of a Christmas dinner or a holiday party. He gives you peace from victory over sin, death, and the devil.

WE CAN HAVE A MERRY CHRISTMAS BECAUSE THE CHRIST-CHILD DELIVERS FREEDOM, PEACE, AND COMFORT. Merry Christmas? No, Merry Christmas! Your Christmas is merry not because of holiday plans or any other external factors, but your Christmas is merry because of what this Christ-child has done for you. He has defeated sin, death, and the devil, leaving you freedom, peace, and comfort. Thanks be to God. Amen!