

**Living the Celebration**

## COMMUNION

January 3, 2021

**Isaiah 61:10 through 62:3**

*<sup>10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. <sup>11</sup> For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations...*

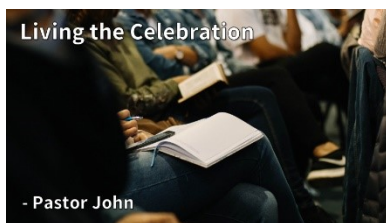
*<sup>1</sup> For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. <sup>2</sup> The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. <sup>3</sup> You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

**Ephesians 1: 3-14**

*<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup> He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup> that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> he has made*

*known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>11</sup> In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <sup>12</sup> so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.*

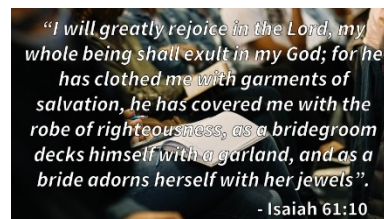
*<sup>13</sup> In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; <sup>14</sup> this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.*



Concluding our “Where You Belong” worship series today, we begin in Isaiah 61, with a people on an unexpected journey. The people in exile are seeking a

new home, a home with God. In the Christmas celebration we rejoiced that Jesus came in the flesh to dwell with us, making a home in our hearts. Isaiah’s people longed to be home, to be one with their God. In Ephesians, Paul writes of the blessings of being at one with God. Paul’s words today remind us that living a life of faith, practicing holy living, allows us to live the celebration of Christmas every day. Today, on Epiphany Sunday we celebrate the visit of the wise men to the infant King. We recognize that they were living the celebration as the followed the star so that they could worship Jesus and present him with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. As we begin this morning, let us begin with a word of prayer...

As we begin this morning, turn with me to Isaiah 61. The prophet writes with a joy in the redemption that the Lord will bring to Israel. There is an excitement and a beauty to Isaiah's words today. The Lord's actions cause great rejoicing. I will be reading verse ten: *"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels"*. Isaiah's whole being will praise God. Isaiah recognizes what wonderful gifts salvation and righteousness are. Do we? Do we live like we have been decked out or adorned with something wonderful and amazing?



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- Isaiah 61:10

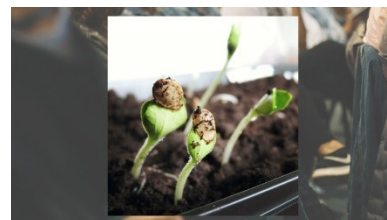
*"A small boy had been consistently late for dinner. One particular day his parents had warned him to be on time, but he arrived later than ever. He found his parents already seated at the table, about to start eating. Quickly he sat at his place, and then noticed what was set before him – a slice of bread and a glass of water. There was silence as he sat staring at his plate, crushed. Suddenly he saw his father's hand reach over, pick up his plate and set it before himself. Then his dad put his own full plate in front of his son, smiling warmly as he made the exchange. When the boy became a man, he said, 'All my life I've known what God was like by what my father did that night'".* Do we see God and his good gifts this way? Do we see the gifts of salvation and righteousness like a full plate that has been placed before us, replacing our plate with a meager slice of bread?

In verse eleven, Isaiah compares the righteousness that will spring up in Israel to the shoots that spring up in a garden. How many of you like to garden? What is it, do you think, that causes you to like gardening?...

For me it is always amazing to watch what happens over the course of the season. I usually plant a variety of things in the garden – each seed is unique, just as the plant that sprouts up from it is unique. On day one I plant a bunch of different kinds of seeds as well as a few small plants that a greenhouse grew to that point. And then I wait. Daily I go out and peer down at the dirt, looking for those little green shoots to be poking up through the soil. Does anyone else do this early in the gardening season?... How do you think

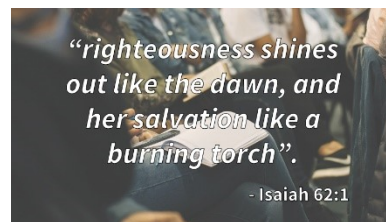
I feel when I see that first green shoot poking through?

Yes, I am excited. As the summer moves along, these little plants grow and soon enough that little seed has



produced twenty or thirty zucchinis in a single season. Or one plant produces hundreds of cherry tomatoes. Another produces dozens of green beans. Or another seed yields up a beet or a carrot or a radish. To me, a garden is very much like that plate full of food that the young boy received or like the gift of salvation and righteousness that God offered to Israel and that we receive as believers. All are good gifts of a loving God. Like Isaiah was led to offer up his praises to God, so too are we called to praise the Lord our God for the good gifts of righteousness and salvation. Isaiah, though, does not just praise God. Look with me at the start of chapter 62 to see what else Isaiah does.

In verse one we read that Isaiah *"will not keep silent"* and that he *"will not rest"*. Why? For Zion's sake. He commits to proclaiming the good news until the glory of God's people is realized. Isaiah will continue to praise God, will continue to proclaim the gifts that God offers, until her *"righteousness shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch"*.



For Isaiah, Israel's glory will not be found in her power or riches, not in the enemies they have defeated, not in the beauty of the rebuilt temple. Her glory will be the righteousness that shines out from the people, a light that draws others to her and to God. Isaiah prophesies that this light will shine out for the nations and kings to see. Our passage concludes with these words: *"You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God"*. God will raise up the faithful like an earthly king would raise up the crown he wears. Those who keep the faith, those who are made right by Christ, they will be like the crown, like the diadem in God's hand. When redeemed by the Lord, the faithful will shine like a crown. God will lift them up.

After a generation in exile, the Israelites long for home. Just last week, Mary and Joseph wandered Bethlehem, longing for a home for the night, for a place to welcome their firstborn into the world. Today, as we gather on this first Sunday of 2021, do we not long for a place to be home - a place where we can be honest and fully ourselves, sins and all? Do we not long for a home where we can rest from our weariness and burdens? Where we can leave 2020 behind?

As Isaiah speaks of kings and nations seeing God's glory, he is reminding the Israelites and he is reminding us that God's kingdom is different. Kings and Presidents and other leaders rule with power and might and intimidation and threats. Not so with God. God's kingdom is radically different. In Isaiah 61 we were reminded that God gives salvation and righteousness to those who believe. God gives abundant life and he gives beauty to that life. God's presence – whether walking with us in the day to day of life or simply sitting with us in the valley – God's presence is a constant in the midst of everything.

God's righteousness seeks to spring up - daily in our lives and one day when God renews the face of the earth. Experiencing God's presence in this life and knowing and trusting the future promise of a new heaven and earth, allow us to create a new present, allows us to be a living part of the celebration of God's reign. God invites us to create a present of hope, a present filled with life in all places, even the unexpected ones. We are invited to create a present knowing the fulfillment of God's love has come in Christ and continues to be manifest in and through us in our lives and in our world. Through Christ, God invites us to be engaged in his created world and in the work of the kingdom that is both here and yet to come. We are to live as the light shining out into the world. We are invited to be living witnesses to the glory of God in our world.



As we turn to Ephesians 1, verses 3-14, we are reminded both of our place in Christ and of our invitation to embrace the fullness of the community of faith. We are called both to continue the journey together and to invite others along on this journey of faith.

Paul speaks in this passage with the same level of enthusiasm that Isaiah speaks with in chapters 61 and 62. Like Isaiah, Paul is keenly aware of the many blessings that are his through his saving relationship with Jesus Christ. In verse three Paul speaks of *"every spiritual blessing"*, focusing not on any earthly blessing but on what God has done through Jesus to bring all people into a saving relationship with God.

As God's children, we are holy and blameless. Christ has paid the atoning sacrifice to make us right with God. Amen?... Now, just as I asked earlier, I ask again: Do we always recognize the blessings that are ours through our relationship with Jesus Christ? Do we live each day celebrating our blessings?

*"Yates Pool is a famous oil field in West Texas. During the Great Depression of the 1930's, this field was a sheep ranch owned by a man named Ira Yates. Because of Yates' inability to make enough money on his ranching operation to make his mortgage payment, he was in danger of losing his ranch.*

*With little money for clothes or food, his family, like many others during the depression years, had to live on a government subsidy. Day after day, Yates would watch his sheep as they grazed over those rolling West Texas hills. He would rack his brain trying to figure out some way to pay all his bills.*

*One day a crew of men from an oil company came into the area and convinced Yates that there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat test well. Yates agreed and signed a lease contract.*

*At 1,115 feet, the drillers struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. But that was only the beginning. Many more wells came in, some more than twice as productive as the first.*



*In the 1960's, after oil had been pumped for more than 30 years, a government test of just one of the wells in the Yates Pool showed that it still had a potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day. In the year 2000, Yates Field was still one of the top 10 producers of oil in the United States. And to think, the one-time sheep rancher Yates, owned it all!*

*When Yates purchased the ranch, he was more interested in grazing land for his sheep than he was in the oil and mineral rights. There he was, living on a government subsidy, but sitting on a mammoth underground lake of incredibly valuable oil. He was a potential multimillionaire living in poverty. What was his problem? It was simply that he did not know the oil was there”.*

As believers, are we sometimes unaware of the riches offered through our relationship with Jesus Christ? I think sometimes we are. Do we sometimes fail to claim them for ourselves? Sometimes we do. Thankfully, in verse five, Paul reminds us that we, as believers, are *"destined for adoption as his children"* and are recipients of *"his glorious grace"*. Once we make the decision to accept and live with Jesus as the Lord of our life, we are adopted into the family of God. As children, we are blessed by his grace, which God *"freely bestows"* upon us. With God's grace, we are like the little boy in my opening illustration.



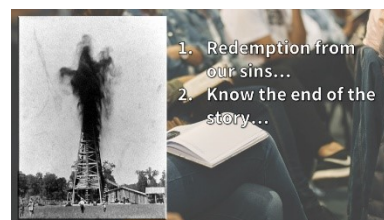
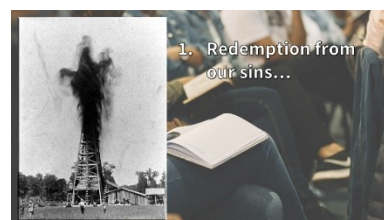
We come to the table deserving a piece of bread and a glass of water, God gives us abundantly, pouring out blessing upon blessing on us, his beloved children. In fact, what God gives us should remind us of that well gushing oil.

Join me as we look at verses seven through ten. This is a virtual what's-what of the blessings that God bestows upon those who love him. First, we have

redemption from our sins. As redeemed children, we do not have to continue to live with the guilt and shame of our past sins. Second, God had made known to us,

*"with all wisdom and insight", the end of the story. The end is this, found in verse ten: in "the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth". All things – including you and me – will*

be gathered to Christ and will be made new. This is the inheritance, that upon which we *"set our hope in Christ"* that Paul speaks of in verses eleven and twelve.



And third, if the first two were not enough, we who believe have been *"marked with the seal of the*

*promised Holy Spirit".* The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is the pledge that one day we will be raised to eternal life. Now, if that list on the right does not elicit in you an emotional and spiritual response that is something like that oil well on the left, well then, we better check your pulse. This list should lead us to celebrate and to go on living the celebration as we go out into the world.



In Isaiah 61 and 62, the prophet pointed to it, to God's plan for the redemption and restoration of Israel. As he spoke these words, Isaiah was living it out loud. He was not being silent, but were the people living the celebration? Coming out of exile, it must have been hard to live it out. The same is true today for folks living under COVID exile. It is imperative, therefore, that we seek to be believers who live out the celebration of God's blessings. How do we ourselves live out the celebration? Much as Isaiah did, being hope and joy among the people. This leads to the next question: In turn, how do help others to know the life that Christ calls them to? The answer is the same – by living out our faith.

In Ephesians we see that Paul was living the celebration of God's love too. In the epistle, we hear Paul calling us to live out the celebration too. He points out all the reasons that we have to live it out – that is the list, right? On Epiphany Sunday we remember that the wise men recognized Jesus as one worthy of both praise and of wonderful gifts. How do we live out our faith in this same model, recognizing Jesus as the one worthy of our praise and of all that we have to offer to Jesus the King? How do we live the celebration, brining joy and hope and peace and love into others' lives?

To answer that question, I would like to close by sharing a part of Bishop Ough's letter as he and Char take leave from the Dakotas and Minnesota Conferences after eight plus years of faithful ministry. Here it is:

*"I leave you with this commission – remember you are God's people called to proclaim the mighty acts of Jesus who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. Go forth, make new disciples and be the light rising in the darkness of a lingering pandemic, racial injustice, economic displacement and political turmoil. Remember, you are God's people for this particular time and place. Continue to imagine and enact God-sized dreams. Stay strong and stay together for the sake of Jesus' mission".*

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- Bishop Bruce Ough

How do we live the celebration, brining joy and hope and peace and love into others' lives? Proclaim the mighty acts of Jesus. Make new disciples. Be the light in the darkness. Continue to imagine and enact God-sized dreams. Stay strong. Stay together. May it all be so as we seek to be living celebrations of God's love in the world. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. What is God's plan for his people? How is your faith becoming a "burning torch" that brings light to the lost? How can it be brighter?
- 2) *Pray*. What do you want or need to change in your life this week to better bring God the glory? Pray for Holy Spirit guidance and assistance!
- 3) *Study*. Re-read Ephesians 1: 7-10. Which of these blessings resonates the deepest with you? How will you be like Isaiah, unable to keep silent?