

Second Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 61:1 – 3, 10 – 11

The Year of the Lord's Favor

*1 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,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.
10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.*

A great commotion arose in the town of Nazareth. Everywhere you could hear people talking in the streets and houses: "Jesus is coming..." Jesus, of course, had grown up in Nazareth. Everyone knew him. Meanwhile, He had become something quite different from the nice boy of Mary and Joseph. As is often the case when someone from the area has achieved something, people gossip. Some said he had completely lost his mind. Others were proud of "their" Jesus, who had become so famous. They could share in his fame a little and bask in it. Then the famous Jesus came. The synagogue was packed. Curious onlookers stood in the streets outside as well. Solemnly, they presented him with the scroll to read. It was the very same text we just read from the Book of Isaiah. Inside was a message of joy, of happiness and of salvation. The captives would be set free. Those who mourn would be comforted. Joy would fill the air! Jesus read this all aloud, laid the scroll aside, and looked directly at the crowd. The room fell silent. Then Jesus raised his voice a second time and said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled!" The Scripture was fulfilled only because Jesus himself stood before them. Jesus himself, through his very being, was the complete fulfillment of what Isaiah had foreseen many years before. "Today all this is fulfilled," Jesus said, and this is precisely what

Jesus proved with his life. The poor and persecuted were blessed, as well as those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus himself interceded for all the suffering in the world. He himself, through the marks of the nails and his suffering on the cross, transformed the world's suffering into joy. Because Jesus spoke these words and because he gave his life for them, millions of people were saved. The meek and those who mourn were comforted and raised up. This was fulfilled in throughout the world, simply because Jesus spoke these words in Nazareth. There is no other message in the entire world so closely associated with the person as the message Jesus proclaimed that day. The translation of "Gospel" is "Good News," and that's also why joy is such a major theme throughout the Bible, appearing at least 200 times. So, we can confidently assert that it is God's will to bring us joy. "I bring you good news of great joy," the angel tells the shepherds in the field. We would do well to once again explore the roots of joy. What exactly is joy? You can't command anyone to be joyful. Joy can neither be bought nor given away. It's like a guest who arrives by chance and can just as easily disappear again. When was the last time you truly felt joy? Perhaps during a social gathering with friends, or perhaps when someone spoke an encouraging word to you—a word that touched your heart with deep joy, the kind of joy that permeates all of life, that makes all the clouds of sadness disappear and makes the sun to shine. Do you know the feeling of being truly happy? Martin Luther once said, "Joy is the graduation cap of faith." If I understand him correctly, he means that joy, just like faith, cannot be created by us humans, but is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In precisely this sense, Isaiah looks far into the future and bases his joy on the fact that God gives him a cloak of righteousness and a garment of salvation. As children of God, we are truly endowed with joy. The new garment that is placed upon us through baptism is not just a suitable garment. It is identical with all the salvation that became flesh in Jesus. The garment and the cloak we put on are the same size and shape as Jesus Christ, who said in Nazareth, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled!" You think that's too much for you? No! Because Jesus has taken my place in the humble manger, and because the same Jesus bore my shame and my sin on the cross, his righteousness is my righteousness. His salvation is also my salvation. His joy is also my joy. The message that Jesus proclaimed in Nazareth is embodied by Jesus himself. And this very message is now embodied by us. It has become a part of our lives. The message of the Gospel not only fits us outwardly, but also inwardly. It becomes a part of us. The freedom of being a child of God is so deeply connected with me that not only can I feel the joy, but others can see it. It simply radiates from me. Just as we cannot create the light ourselves, we cannot create the Gospel and the Good News ourselves. We don't have to. Even the prophet Isaiah was not tasked with bringing joy. He was merely given to spread the message of joy. We have no other task than this—what a relief! We have nothing to do but tell others what Jesus has done. We can simply rejoice in this. We can rejoice that this message has reached millions of people. We can also rejoice that generations of people throughout the world, who are brokenhearted, have been encouraged and comforted. We can rejoice that this very message has come to us today. That is why we are here in worship. Each of us is a part of this message and a part of this joy! Before our eyes and before our ears, God is fulfilling what he has always desired: joy!

Amen.