

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:5  
Galatians 4:4-7

First Sunday After Christmas  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
December 27, 2020

## **Gifts Worth Keeping**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

In our Old Testament Lesson on this First Sunday after Christmas we hear words of joy over what God has done in redeeming Israel. Speaking for the whole community of Jerusalem, Isaiah likens the garments of salvation to the wedding finery of a bride or groom. Listen to these words from Isaiah 61:10 – 62:5...

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

Our Epistle Lesson today provides us an opportunity to step back from the pace and sometimes frenzy of Christmas, to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' coming into the world. Paul declares that we are no longer "slaves to the law; now we are the children of God and members of his family." Formerly orphaned, but now adopted and in possession of a divine inheritance. Listen to these words from Galatians 4:4-7...

### *Sermon*

What could be happier than a Wedding Day? In this case Norman and Michelle have completed the mandatory premarital counseling sessions by the minister who will perform their service. It will be their second marriage. For after 25 years of matrimony, Norman's first wife left home, not to return. Michelle had married young, and sadly, the relationship spiraled into a destructive cycle of abuse. "It was really bad," she confessed.

But the marriage experiences of Norman and Michelle are not unusual in our time, with about half of all marriages in North America ending in divorce. The dissolution of so many unions seems somehow incongruous with the delight and promise of the wedding day. With joyful guests and bountiful best wishes.

In his reflection of Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, Miroslav Volf speaks of the difference between optimism and hope. Says Volf:

Optimism is based on the possibilities of things as they have come to be, hope is based on the possibilities of God, irrespective of how things are.

Well, given their stories, it would not be surprising if Norman and Michelle feel a mixture of optimism and hope. While they know well how rough the edges of marriage can be, as people of faith, they trust God to bless them in this new life. And so, they say their vows, exchange rings, and begin again.

In the book of the prophet Isaiah we find both the theology of hope and the metaphor of marriage, despite a painful separation resulting from unfaithfulness to God on the part of the people of Israel. There is reason to hope, revealed in five divine gifts.

The prophet has seen the destruction of the political kingdom of Israel. He has seen the exiles of Babylon return home. They are home now, but in a metaphorical sense, they have a long way to go. Rebuilding is hard work. Worse still, they are uncertain about God's intention toward them—thinking that maybe God is indifferent, lacking in resolve or commitment to this small, struggling community. Maybe all the talk of God being their Redeemer is mere wishful thinking. A chill has begun to circle their hearts. The people were urged to keep the faith but did not really see how their deliverance could be complete.

Yes, the Babylonian exile was a humiliating and shameful experience for the people of Israel. These are people who had claimed honor by virtue of a special relationship with God. They were to know God's blessing and through them God would bless all the peoples of the earth. (Gen. 12:1-3) They were the apple of God's eye. But that relationship has been shamed by Israel's waywardness, and subsequently being conquered by and taken captive in a foreign country.

Israel understands that the new thing the Lord is doing involves a genuine intimacy between God and his redeemed people. And so he colors this hymn of praise and thanksgiving with a picture of wedding festivities—the bride and groom adorning themselves for the ceremony.

For Isaiah, this wedding imagery emphasizes his exultation in God for the rebirth of a relationship with Israel, for her time of salvation. So, the prisoner’s clothing of exile is exchanged for festive wedding garments.

And it is clear that God’s capacity to save Israel transcends their own. Not only will the exiles be reunited with God in Jerusalem, they will celebrate, and the city will break into song:

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. (61:10)

First then of the divine gifts is the gift of new clothes.

Then the prophet continues in verse 11:

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
 and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
 so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise  
 to spring forth before all the nations.

To the gift of new clothes is added a second gift from heaven—a garden. As surely as new life comes each spring, as surely as the garden brings forth fruit, so will the salvation of Israel “spring forth” with “righteousness and praise.” From the wasteland of a broken relationship will now burst forth green shoots. Past taunts of surrounding nations that “God has surely left you, Israel”—these will turn to praise. To imagine all this is no small thing—it is the work of hope that is grounded in the faithfulness of God. A new beginning will occur by virtue

of divine grace and power. Just so, the good news of great joy offers a new beginning for us today. As Paul said to the church in Galatia:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (4:4-5)

New clothes, a garden. Then the third gift is the gift of light.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
until her vindication goes forth as brightness,  
and her salvation as a burning torch.  
The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory. (62:1-2b)

This side of Christmas, John declares:

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:4-5)

God's people will by God's grace bear forth this light of Christ. They will be called the light of the world. Like a city set on a hill, they will be a beacon of hope and assurance.

New clothes, a garden, light. Then fourthly, "a new name."

The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory;  
and you shall be called by a new name  
which the mouth of the Lord will give.

The old names recall the suffering and humiliation of defeat and exile. You shall no longer be called "Forsaken," and your land shall no more be termed "Desolate." You shall be called "My Delight Is in Her," and your land "Married." (62:4) A change of name signifies a new direction, a new purpose, a new life. No longer Abram, but Abraham. No longer Jacob, but Israel. No longer Saul, but Paul. This activity of God points to an exciting, new, and wonderful transformation, worthy of a new name.

The final divine gift is that of crowns and jewels.

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. (62:3)

Despite all their failures, miseries, doubts, and fears, God would still be their Lord and King, and they will be to God as precious jewels. Likewise, we declare that the Eternal God of heaven became the babe of Bethlehem and poor, that we might be rich. That we might turn burdens into blessings, crosses into crowns, and shame into honor. Hope *can* return as we look to a new year. Not so much by human strength, but by divine grace. And we are assured that we are precious in God's sight.

The Psalmist proclaims, "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

(124:8) Martin Luther said it well in his great 1529 hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God":

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,  
were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he;  
Lord Sabaoth, his name, from age to age the same,  
and he must win the battle.

You know, there are but a few remaining days in this old year of 2020—and what with a pandemic, hurricanes and tornadoes, racial strife, riots and looting, a contentious election, and now a bombing in Nashville—many would like to say, "good riddance!" Friday will be the first day of a new year. Wouldn't this be a grand time to claim some divine Christmas gifts and not return them or exchange them for something else? To nurture a new and vital relationship with God. To cooperate with God in the new creation he brings to us, and through us to others. Wouldn't this be a grand time to imagine ways that this newness might be reflected in our personal life, in our family life, in our church life, in our work, in our citizenship?

May God give us ears to hear, and eyes to see, and hearts to cherish the good news of great joy. That in Christ something new has come to birth. That despite everything, something new can be born in us. Why, that would be like putting on wedding garments and entering a new life, like being a garden that will bear fruit, like walking in the light, like having a new name that reflects a new direction and purpose, like receiving a crown and jewels and knowing that we are precious in the Lord's sight.

Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace to people of goodwill! Amen.