

Rejoice: God Changes Everything

3rd Sun. in Advent – 12/11/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Isaiah 35:1-10 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 4, **“Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you’.”**

Introduction

✘ Sometimes, something happens, and it changes most everything. Coming up on 40 years ago this May, I stood at an altar along with my soon-to-be-wife, Mary Beth. We faced each other. I said my vows and she said hers. We exchanged rings and the pastor pronounced us husband and wife. Ever since that day things have been different. Something happened, and everything changed.

→ Five years after the wedding, Mary Beth and I went to the hospital and our first child, Brittnie, was born. And again, ever since that day, our lives have been changed. You all have your own experiences like that; graduations, weddings, children and grandchildren are born, job and career changes and more. Something happens, and everything changes.

✘ Our Reading from Isaiah 35 reflects on this reality. Isaiah says that when God comes to save, everything – and in this instance it really is, everything changes.

I. God comes to Save – Creation Changes

✘ In fact, all of Creation changes. Isaiah describes the land. It's barren; a wilderness; a desert. The land is inhospitable and dangerous; a place where things just don't grow. It's brown and ugly. But when God comes to save, it becomes luxurious and green. Grass grows, and the ground will be covered with a carpet of flowers. In verse two Isaiah compares it to Carmel, Sharon, and Lebanon, which are known for their glorious vegetation, trees, and beauty. I like to think of it like the change from winter to spring. In February, everything is brown and there are no leaves on the trees. Then in April and May trees turn green; things begin to grow and birds are singing. It lifts your spirit and you feel joyous, and excited once again. This is the picture Isaiah paints for us of when God comes to save.

✘ Then in verse three he shifts to a different image; one of people with weak hands, feeble knees, and anxious hearts. They are dismayed and discouraged, disheartened, depressed, and despaired. Others are blind and deaf. Some can't speak; some are lame. But then, when God comes to save, the weak, the discouraged, and the disheartened are suddenly strong and courageous once again.

→ People see and hear and shout for joy and “leap like a deer”, according to verse six. It calls to mind those medical stories where a young deaf child hears for the first time. She's been deaf all her life. Then doctors do surgery. Maybe she receives an implant or something else. Suddenly, the child hears her mother's voice. And you see her face just light up with joy. Or like our son Travis who has been color blind all his life. A few years ago he put on a pair of those special glasses designed to address that, and suddenly his brain was so filled with color that it shocked him. He said it was physically painful. But for a brief time he had the joy of seeing what a red shirt and the green grass and trees really look like.

✘ Then in verse eight Isaiah talks about a highway. Now at that time, most highways were more like trails. They were dangerous. Wild animals or thieves and robbers could attack you. But everything changes when God comes to save. The road becomes a highway of holiness where Isaiah says only the redeemed can travel in safety. Those who have been ransomed by the promised Savior have no more fear. They reach their destination as they all travel together. All

of their fear and danger is changed – according to verse 10 – into “everlasting joy” and “gladness” as they sing their praise to God.

→ That’s Isaiah’s Good News; when God comes to save, everything changes! Joy fills both the land and the people’s lives.

II. Jesus comes to save – past, today, Last Day.

✘ But when will this happen? When does God come to save? Well, picture a manger in a stable in Bethlehem. At the time of Caesar Augustus, that would have been completely normal. Almost everyone had a stable for their animals and mangers for their feed.

→ But one evening in the little town of Bethlehem, a child is born, and His name is Jesus, which literally means “Yahweh saves”. So there in that manger; in an ordinary stable, everything changes; just because Jesus is born into it. The very meaning of the name “Immanuel” is “God with us”. An otherwise quiet night suddenly fills the world with joy and praise. God has come to save!

✘ Years later, when Jesus is a man; during His ministry, He comes into people’s lives and everything changes. A man born blind meets Jesus and suddenly he can see. He told the Jewish leaders who were trying to find fault with Jesus, “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see” (Jn. 9:25). And despite their threats, the man proclaimed, “‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped Him” (Jn. 9:38) in joy and thanksgiving.

→ Or think of the tax collector, Zacchaeus. Remember tax collectors were not well-liked at that time as they were known to rip people off by taking extra money for themselves. Yet this one, because he was short, climbed a tree to see Jesus. When Jesus saw him, He said, “Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today” (Lk. 19:5). And everything changed. Salvation came to that house and Zacchaeus made things right with those he cheated. He followed Jesus with joy in his heart and praise on his lips from that time forth.

→ There’s also a woman caught in adultery, and another – a prostitute. Jesus comes into their lives and everything changes. The prostitute weeps at His feet, drying the tears with her hair (Lk. 7:38). The one caught in adultery goes away without condemnation after she is saved from a stoning and told to sin no more (Jn. 8:9-11).

→ One more: a man is paralyzed and cannot walk. So he is let down through a roof into a house. Jesus gives him his legs back so that he can run and jump again. Even more, his sins have been forgiven. (Lk. 5:18-25)

→ You see what happens when God comes as Jesus to save? Everything changes.

✘ Then, as His earthly ministry comes to an end, Jesus comes to save in the most gruesome of places. It was ugly. It reeked of shed blood, agony, and rotting flesh. In that day the cross was an instrument of death; a horrific place to die. But now take a look. We have crosses in just about every church; for jewelry and along the side of the road. We call it “Good Friday” because when Jesus hangs on the cross, everything changes. Instead of judgment and death, we have forgiveness and life through the cross.

✘ Next we head to a graveyard. In Jesus’ day a tomb was closed, and the body stayed put. Except with Jesus; with Jesus everything changed at the tomb. The stone rolls away and life bursts forth again, including the life of creation God has given in this world. All of Creation groans under pollution, misuse, hurricanes, typhoons, fires, earthquakes, drought, and all that devastates our land. All of it is waiting for the day when Jesus comes back to save it fully and completely. When He comes He will make it new once again. Christ’s resurrection is the proof

positive that when Jesus comes to save on the Last Day, all of creation will be renewed, and rejoicing is all that will be heard.

- ✘ But while we wait; even today, when Jesus comes into our lives, everything changes for us, doesn't it? Think about the baptismal font. Just a little bit of water, but when you apply it, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," Jesus is there. A child born sinful only a day or two before; a child who needs Jesus, is instantly forgiven and welcomed into His arms; brought into God's family called the Church.

→ I lost count a long time ago of how many infants I have been blessed to baptize. Some of those little ones were perfectly silent and content the entire time, while others were clearly unhappy and screaming the whole time. But those cries could never take away from the moment. As I poured the water over their heads, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", each one of them became a child of God; welcomed by Jesus; forgiven; and a part of the Church. Each one was the most joyous of days!

- ✘ So when you have those days that you are discouraged or disappointed or dismayed or disheartened, or even despairing...dear Christian, just think back to your Baptism. That's when everything changed in your life. You became a child of God. Jesus came to save you. You can always rejoice in that gift forevermore.

→ Or think about the Lord's Supper. We come up here. We kneel. We get a little bit of bread. We get a sip of wine. But it's so much more than that. Jesus is present; He comes into our lives in His true body and blood with His Godly strength and peace. We often say that the Lord's Supper gives us life, forgiveness, and salvation. So every time we come forward, everything changes! We are forgiven. We have everlasting life. Jesus comes to save us, and we rejoice!

→ There's only been a few so far, but those numbers will quickly grow, the people whom I have baptized and then have catechized so that I was blessed to offer them their first taste of Christ's body and blood. For me that is a time of unspeakable rejoicing and thanksgiving because I've been blessed to see life, forgiveness, and salvation come to those souls where everything changes twice over because God comes each time to save in Jesus.

- ✘ But honestly, each of us can see that every single day. Just open up His Word. The Bible is not just words on a page. Jesus comes through these words and gives us His Holy Spirit to build us up; to encourage us; to strengthen us. 1 Peter 5:7 tells us to "cast all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you". Yes, Jesus cares when we are struggling, hurting, or grieving.

→ Many of you have had your own times of deep grief, or anguish or pain; times when you were not sure if, or how you would be able to handle things or go on. Some of you, I have seen and been with; even cried together with in those times. It's then that God's Word, in the Psalms or other texts have served as a tremendous source of comfort and assurance; as an important promise that God has come in Jesus to be at your side – in your life; to walk with You in the difficulty, and to change the darkness into light; the sorrow into peace; sometimes even the pain into joy! Yes, the gift of God's perfect Word has the power each day to change everything as well.

III. Traveling on the Highway of Holiness

- ✘ So what about that highway that Isaiah mentions in verse eight and following? As Christians we are all on our way to an eternity of joy, thanksgiving, and praise with Jesus. And friends, we are not traveling alone; we are traveling with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We are a mass of countless people, marching to our heavenly destination in safety and security; and all of it because of Jesus! Without Him, we are doomed and destined and guaranteed to rot and

burn forever in hell. But He has redeemed us; ransomed us from sin, death and the devil by His blood!

→ Everything changed when He came long ago in a manger, on a cross, and out of an empty tomb. God promised He would come as we have heard from Isaiah today. It is joyous good news from long ago. Now we know that He did come with glad tidings of great joy; with angels singing, "Glory to God in the Highest!"

→ But our joy is not only based upon God's past saving work, is it? He still comes today to save us in Jesus, at the baptismal font, at the Lord's Table, and in His Word. Jesus comes to pour out upon us His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Everything changes, and we rejoice!

Conclusion

✘ So as we travel together on His highway with brothers and sisters in His Church, we look forward to that day when Jesus will return again to save us once and for all. On that day, all of creation will be renewed. We will have no more weak hands, feeble knees, or anxious hearts. There will be no more blindness or Alzheimer's or cancer or infections; no more worries or fear about danger. The sorrow and the sighing will be replaced with joyous and exultant praise.

→ Yes, God in Jesus has come to save us. So, let us rejoice, because everything has changed! Amen.