

12/14/08

THE PRAYER OF THE DAY Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

(The prophet proclaims the mission of the Messiah, a mission Jesus Himself embraces when He reads these words in the synagogue.)

1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. 4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

8 "For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed."

10 I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

THE EPISTLE LESSON 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

(St. Paul gives words of encouragement to Christians that will keep them sound and blameless in Christ until He comes again.)

16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

19 Do not put out the Spirit's fire; 20 do not treat prophecies with contempt. 21 Test everything. Hold on to the good. 22 Avoid every kind of evil.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

THE GOSPEL LESSON John 1:6-8, 19-28

(St. John the Baptist gives testimony to Jesus as the One whose way he prepares.)

6 There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. 8

He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. . .

19 Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. **20 He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."**

21 They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No."

22 Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

23 John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

24 Now some Pharisees who had been sent 25 questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

26 "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. 27 He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." 28 This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

INTRO - This Thursday our daughter Mary comes home from college for the Christmas break and we have an appointment for Friday, I believe, to cut down a Christmas tree and then to decorate the house for Christmas. This is not to say that some decorating has not already begun.

Kathy had guests scheduled for yesterday and there are garlands and wreaths, and at least 3 nativity scenes that I know out and about in our home at this time, with more to come. That doesn't include the new sets of outdoor lights I have bought to put up with the lights we already have decorating our house. Have you begun decorating for the Christmas season?

I. These decorations are a beautiful way to celebrate the Christmas season.

A. For children the colored light help spark a wonder and excitement about the Christmas season and the colors shout that something special is happening.

1. Adults find joy in the outward signs that we are celebrating something special, as well.

2. Decorations can tell a story that there is something different happening in the world around us.

B. John the Baptist in our lesson for today was in his own way, a Christmas decoration of His time.

1. His dress, his method, his message all pointed to the fact that there was something new and special happening.

2. But, that special something was not John, it was the promised Messiah, the Lord of the Universe, coming after John to save the world.

II. The problem is that the people of John's day were so excited about John, so excited about the appearance of this promised prophet that they were in danger of missing out on the one this prophet was preparing the people for.

A. You heard the words of the people.

1. **20 He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." 21 They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"**

2. John answered , **"I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"**

3. John was clear about the fact that he was there to prepare the people for the Messiah, to point the people to the Messiah, by baptizing them and calling them to repentance and faith. But they were so excited about John's appearance that they were in danger of missing the Messiah, and some of them did.

B. You know that we face some of the same challenges.

1. Advent and Christmas are about the coming of God Himself, the coming of Jesus.

2. Our celebrations, our decorations, our preparations are intended to point us to that special gift that changes lives with His love and forgiveness and salvation.

3. But you know as well as I do that the decorations and the celebrations can get in the way of us seeing the coming of Jesus.

4. Have you ever been so busy with Christmas celebration that you just wish for Christmas to be over, and you miss the wonder of God's love in the coming of His Son?

III. Our Epistle lesson for today actually gives us a guide for preparation for Christmas that helps us keep our eye on the savior.

A. **16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not put out the Spirit's fire; 20 do not treat prophecies with contempt. 21 Test everything. Hold on to the good. 22 Avoid every kind of evil. 23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.**

1. Christmas is about receiving Jesus and all His love.
2. John calls the people to repentance, to changed lives, in preparation for the coming of Jesus.
3. Actually, the best decorations for Christmas are not just colored lights, cookies and parties, but lives full of faith and love and joy. Did you ever think that your life of love and faith is the greatest Christmas decoration?
4. God calls us to Paul to lives that are different than the rest of the world, lives that stand out, lives that are full of joy in a world of pain; lives that are full of prayer in a world of doubt, lives that are full of thanks in a world of selfishness, lives whose faith and love point others to Jesus.

B. Actually, when we receive Jesus He is the one who makes the changes in our lives.

1. When God's people know that the Son of God came in love, that he was born humbly, died painfully, and rose victorious to over come our sin, it changes our lives.
2. When we know that nothing in this world or eternally can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, it changes our lives.
3. Jesus changes us in the inside, and His light shines on the outside.

CONCLUSION - Please look around you for a minute. What do you see? You see people, but not just any people. You see people who were down and out, and God answered their prayers, and they are now examples of faith. You see people who have fought addictions, and day by day God helps them to win a victory. You see people whose hearts have been broken, but because God loved them they risk love again. You see people whose lives are Christmas decorations pointing to God.

John the Baptist calls people to prepare *their lives* for the coming of the Lord.

We do that when we are full of joy, and prayer, and thanks, and love, and faith, and righteousness, because Jesus makes a difference in our lives.

Is your *life* decorated for Christmas??

