

“TRUE HOLY JOY”      Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11      I Thessalonians 5:16-24      John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Can I get a witness?” This question is one of the prevalent lines in the style of sermonizing that used to be common among revival preachers. They would make a point in their sermons and then query the congregation, “Can I get a witness?” What they meant by saying that was: is there anyone out there who could testify that what I just said is true? It’s a way of getting the folks involved in the sermon, so that it becomes more of a dialogue than just a monologue. I ask you the question this morning, “Can I get a witness?”, as a way to find out if any of you can testify to the good news and joy that we are talking about today—the joyful good news that the Light of Jesus Christ has come into the world.

Like last Sunday, this morning’s Advent Gospel Lection focuses on John the Baptist. We know that John was a forerunner to Jesus Christ, a witness who proclaimed Jesus’ coming. John can be an example for us of a witness to Jesus Christ. Witnessing is not easy. It is not easy to talk about what is most important to us, and there is always the fear that our beliefs will be rejected, scorned, or even ridiculed. But what is needed in all the hustle and bustle of our Christmas activity is someone to say, “I have come to bear witness to the Light.”

Have you noticed the national debate that we are having about the secularization of Christmas? There has been quite a backlash against those businesses that want to call the trees they sell this season, “Holiday Trees,”

instead of “Christmas Trees.” Likewise, many people are refusing to say, “Happy Holidays,” instead of “Merry Christmas.” This is not a new concern. For many years I have refused to use the term, “Season’s Greetings,” because it just does not fit into what I want to say about the holy day we celebrate on December 25. The same concern was raised by Charles Dickens when he wrote “A Christmas Carol” in the Nineteenth Century. Ebenezer Scrooge could only think of Christmas as humbug because it cost him a day of work and put no money into his pocket. We all would be well served to see a production of this wonderful story on stage or film this season or to read the book to be reminded of what Christmas is really about.

In all the debate about the secularization and commercialization of Christmas, you and I need to remember one central truth. It is up to us Christians to keep Christ in Christmas. You and I and other Christians are those who need to bear witness to the Light of the World. You and I need to say that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior, and that God sent him here 2000 years ago to bring about the salvation of all humankind.

The good news is that the True Light is in the world, but many people do not see him or know him. Our joy comes in knowing him and bearing witness so that others, too, may know him and receive his joy. Can I get a witness? Is there anyone here who can testify to the saving power and the love of God made known through Jesus?

John the Baptist is an unlikely figure to lift up as one who knew all about true holy joy. Do you usually associate John with peace and joy? He seems rather a wildish man to us. After all, he lived in the wilderness with no creature comforts, and he preached the very demanding message of repentance. We would picture John as a stern-faced character, so serious that the idea of joy might not be associated with him. But John was resolute in his mission to bear witness to the Light, and he was fulfilled, for the Light came in Jesus. John the Baptist did know all about true holy joy, for he surrendered himself whole-heartedly to God and to God's will for his life.

Joy is our theme today. Joy must always be the mood of our hearts and spirits when we remember that God has sent his Son into our world. Even as the Old Testament prophets looked into the future for the coming of the Messiah, they knew that his advent would be a joyful experience. From Isaiah we have read this morning of the good news that God has appointed One to come to redeem those who are in trouble. Notice the imagery that Isaiah used. God's appointed One will give garlands instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. All of these are symbols of joy.

Likewise, St. Paul sounded the note of joy in his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, as he told his readers to rejoice always, to pray, and to give thanks. This general directive is for us, too. We can rejoice always, for we know the good news that the Lord has come. We can pray always, seeking

the guidance of the Holy Spirit for our lives each day. And we give thanks in all circumstances, for we remember how great God's love is toward us.

Look deeply into your life today. Do you have a firm grip on the kind of joy that we are talking about? Surely we all agree that this is supposed to be the most joyful season of the year, but can you testify today that the true holy joy of Christmas resides in your spirit?

The lack of joy in our society and in our own lives is traceable to people being so wrapped up in their own selfish and artificial little worlds. This self-centeredness, what the psychologists would call narcissism, is a common sin and sickness of our society. Some folks are so busy chasing after good times and kicks that they would not know happiness if it knocked them down. There is no joy to be found in seeking after the gratifications that this world has to offer. Everything that we can get in terms of earthly goods and tributes is prone to tarnish very quickly and to leave us feeling very let down.

Christmas is a very exciting time. But I have had the experience, and I suppose that you can all identify with it, of feeling a certain emptiness and a sense of sadness when it was over. When all the presents are opened and the tree is bare, we are prone to ask, "Is that all there is?" We ask that question when we have put the focus on what things we will get for Christmas, instead of focusing on Jesus and being true to him and his call upon our lives.

But I can testify today about a joy that will never fade or grow dull. I can testify to an absolute assurance in the goodness of life and in the presence

of Almighty God with us for today and every day to come. Yes, I can testify today about that deep wellspring of eternal joy that is both true and holy, which resides in anyone who comes to Jesus in simple faith and trust and says to him, “I claim you as my Savior and my Lord.”

Joy comes from a large vision—a vision of eternity and the true meaning of life. Joy cannot be found in earthly things, for we know that all such will fade and pass away. Joy is found in those lasting values, in relationships to God and to each other. True joy is a gift. It is not the giddiness of laughter, the mere gratification of emotion; it is not fulfilled ambition or an honored position. Joy is a gift of God, given to us freely when we say, “My delight is in the Lord.” Why are the saints joyful and happy? Is it because they have everything the world has to offer? No. Rather it is because they seek the only really necessary thing—the Grace of God.

If this Advent will be Jubilee when our prisons are opened, if light will shine in our darkness, if this will really be a season of peace and joy, it will be because someone, a few, many bear witness to the Light. Can I get a witness? In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.