

Cross-Words: See, Now
Isaiah 52:1-15 (NIV)
Advent Mid-Week Three
December 14, 2016

Awake, awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength. Put on your garments of splendor, O Jerusalem, the holy city. The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again. Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem. Free yourself from the chains on your neck, O captive Daughter of Zion. For this is what the Lord says: "You were sold for nothing, and without money you will be redeemed." For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: "At first my people went down to Egypt to live; lately, Assyria has oppressed them. "And now what do I have here?" declares the Lord. "For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock," declares the Lord. "And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed. Therefore my people will know my name; therefore in that day they will know that it is I who foretold it. Yes, it is I." How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God. Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the vessels of the Lord. But you will not leave in haste or go in flight; for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard. See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness – so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Tonight's reading from Isaiah is full of attention-grabbing words and phrases. In the first verse, the words, "Awake, awake," call us to shake the cobwebs out and tune into what's going on. God has something important to tell us. That's why verse 8 begins with, "Listen!" The words, "Depart, depart, go out from there!" tell us the immediacy of something that needs to happen, right now! God invites us to look, listen, watch, and act. Something special is happening.

There is an urgency in Isaiah's words. The prophet is calling for God's people to prepare for a very important event. These words of Isaiah were written over 2500 years ago, but they still call on us to look, listen, watch, and act because something miraculous is about to happen.

We need to awaken because we have been sleeping. We need to proclaim because we have been silent. We need to watch and look because we have not been very attentive. We must continue to believe and confess because we have been timid and reluctant to do so.

When God's Word is preached, many people tune out, thinking, "I've heard all that before." When we talk about studying God's Word, many people reply, "I already read it." When we talk about attending church, some excuse themselves with, "Too long, too boring, always seems like the same old stuff." Too many Christians echo the words of Ecclesiastes: *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun* (Ecc 1:9 NIV).

However, that is only true if you want it to be true. As we approach Bethlehem again this year, we need to take an important lesson from Isaiah. God wants us to see, now! If we open our eyes to what is truly happening, we will find ourselves participating with the Christmas characters and we will experience an awakened joy over the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb.

It is essential that we never lose sight of our need for constant contact with God's Word. It would be great if we always acted in line with God's will. If we had a total grasp of God's Word and an unflinching faith, we would never fall into fits of depression. We would never give in to passions and temptations. We would sail through life with peace and joy. But that's not how it is. We need contact with God's Word, and we need it now!

It's in God's Word that we learn that, through Jesus, we are linked to all the covenant promises of God. We celebrate with all those who have celebrated God's love through the ages – Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, and thousands of others.

In tonight's reading, Isaiah reaches out to announce the covenant promise of the Messiah: *Awake, awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength. Put on your garments of splendor* (Is 52:1 NIV). Isaiah says the same to us, "Wake up. Get all dressed up. There's going to be a celebration." God's promised Messiah is coming.

God has always spoken Good News. He spoke good news to Adam and Eve, he spoke Good News through Isaiah, and he speaks Good News today. God himself declares peace, good tidings, and salvation. It's important that each successive generation hear and believe that good news for themselves.

Special times of the year, like Christmas and Easter, get us all charged up and we feel like we can conquer the world. But there are also other times. Times that are not so positive. We create one disaster after another for ourselves. We sin. We do stupid things. We are haunted by what we have done. We are convicted by God's Law.

At those times, we are comforted by God's Good News. When we are in the pits of self-pity and depression, we need to hear Good News. We need to see that God's promise is for us, too. The Messiah, the Christ, is soon to be born. Right now is the moment of Good News. Right now we need to hear "Rejoice! We are saved! We are forgiven!"

At Christmas and Easter, we hear the music of Handel's *Messiah*. Before Handel wrote this piece, he was near suicide. A few days before, he and his orchestra had been thrown out into the streets of London. Handel was sick, weary, and depressed. The last

thing he wanted to do was write a new piece of music. But, with a little prodding, Handel was coaxed into putting Christ's act of salvation to music. Handel was deeply moved by how the Lord worked through him. When he was finished, he declared, "I've never been as happy as I am right now."

We, too, have reason to be that happy. We, too, are God's chosen and saved people. Christ was born for us. He shed his blood and died for us. He rose and became victory for us. He's coming again to receive us. That is the Good News we must never tire of hearing, and we can never hear it too often. When we hear God's Good News, we should sing out with Mary's words: *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior* (Lk 1:46-47 NIV).

The reality of Christmas is that God's promise made through Isaiah is fulfilled: *The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God* (Is 52:10 NIV). That is truly Good News. News that good should not only be listened to, it should also be verbalized and actualized.

When we truly see Jesus, the Holy Spirit revitalizes our spirits. Changes take place within us. These changes prompt Isaiah to tell us: *Depart, depart, go out from there!* (Is 52:11 NIV). He tells us to avoid everything sinful. Get rid of everything that is wrong or unclean. Purify yourselves and walk with God. We actualize the joy of our salvation when we declare our faith in Christ through our word and our actions.

We hear a lot at Christmas about love and good will. God calls us to realize that we are his people in this world. We are to communicate the love and good will of Christ to others, starting with the ones closest to us.

In today's world, interpersonal relationships break down easily, especially family relationships. God would have us accept the fact that our spouse is a child of God to be loved, cherished, and nurtured. Our marriages are to reflect the love and joy Jesus brings to us.

There is also a need to soothe the irritations that arise between parents and children. Despite rebellious attitudes, broken rules, misunderstandings, and a lack of communication, both parents and children need to realize the other members of their family are also members of God's family and they should be respected and valued.

The love of Christ helps us respond to others who need to see an example of God's grace at work in our lives; our boss, the "old coot" down the street, the neighbor we don't understand, the people who live in poverty that we drive past every day, those who seem to "have it all" but are empty inside. They all need to see the love of Christ and they need to see it now!

God has proclaimed the message of salvation throughout the ages. Yet, when we hear it again today, it's fresh and new. God calls us to come **now** to Bethlehem and **see** the miracle.

We look on with wonder and joy. Christmas is so much more than giving gifts and seeing family. The carols, the decorations, the food, and the festivities are all a celebration of the Christ Child who was born for our salvation. We thank God for this message from Isaiah, which prepares us, stimulates us, and challenges us to see our Savior Jesus Christ – **now!**