

Third Sunday in Advent – 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

The Light of Christ shines in this place. Christ the King Lutheran Church is *church* in the fullest sense of the word. Christ and His Word, Christ and His ministry, Christ and His life – we have been drawn into the Messianic King. We have been drawn into Jesus' death and resurrection. We have been drawn into His church. Each of you has known the vigor of the Holy Spirit, who attends God's Word, who inspires faith and leads you into the truth. Each of you has known the guilt of your sin. Each of you has known the liberation of forgiveness. Christ shed His blood for you and He is determined to keep *you*, His sheep, in His church. The world is dangerous. The world is faithless. The world is idolatrous and vain and a constant source of temptation. In this world every sinner encounters pain. Every one of us has known loss or disappointment or disillusionment or doubt or worse. Sin is everywhere. Christ's church is a sanctuary, a refuge of grace. Jesus is present wherever two or three are gathered in His Name (Matthew 18:20). In this place we preach Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23). He said: "In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the Way. John bore witness. John bore witness about the Light. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:9). Witness; the church is Christ's witness to the world. Christ's church testifies to the truth. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Christ's church hearkens to His voice and we make straight His path. Being church means that we walk in the Way. Walking in the Way is a witness to the world about who we are, about who the Lord Christ is, and what it means to be church. Over and over in the OT, God called to His people Israel, saying, return (Deuteronomy 4:30; 1 Samuel 7:3; Jeremiah 4:1; Hosea 12:6). "Return to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12). Return implies departure. Return implies having been near and then leaving. The truth is that Christians fall away. The heart grows dull to the truth and craves something else. All kinds of twisted thoughts drive Christians away from Christ's church. I'm missing out. Christianity is so narrow. There's no fun over there. The list is endless. God sees. God knows. And He sends word: "Return." Love calls men back to Christ's church. Love seeks you.

Prepare the way! Make straight His path. John the Baptist was a prophesy fulfilled. Isaiah had spoken about a voice crying in the wilderness. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plane. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 40:3-5). Is it really a physical road? The Baptist told his audience that they better get ready because the Messiah is coming. He is coming and He is righteous and having salvation and there is life in no other. One receives the Messianic King aright or life comes to an end. John was a witness and those who hearkened to his voice made ready. The church is a witness. Christians know the veracity of God's Word and this Word, in them, stirs them to readiness. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. That means your heart, your mind, your soul. Repent of all that which defies God's will. Sin hurts you. Sin hurts your neighbor. Sin hurts those who need you.

Repentance is a valid word in the hearts of Christians. Daily we sin and daily we repent. That's what it means to make straight a highway for our God.

Here's what God does. He exalts those of low degree and He brings down the mighty from their thrones. He lifts every valley and He brings down every mountain and hill. When you are broken because of your sin, or the sin someone has committed against you, He lifts you to the place of honor, the seat which Christ purchased for you, conferring on you His grace, assuring you of His Fatherly love. God sees the humble. God sees the contrite. God sees the people that the world does not see. He gives them true treasure; peace, comfort, hope, and every promise of His fidelity. God was faithful to Beverly Soso. Beverly suffered with Alzheimer's disease. She suffers no longer. The place of honor is given to her, the place Christ prepared. God exalts the lowly. The Mighty One has done great things for Beverly (died for her, rose again for her, breathed His Spirit into her). The Mighty One has brought her home. The proud God will humble – to teach, to restore, to discipline. Me; you; God will humble us. Over and over sometimes; out of love; to strip us of pride and direct us to that which truly exalts us. What truly exalts us is a Savior hung on a cross.

A Savior hung on a cross – that is the Way that we walk in, that is the God whose path we make straight, that is the reason there is a church. A Savior hung on a cross is why we baptize Russell Wayne and Ellowanne Beck. A Savior hung on a cross is the God who puts His blood in the water of baptism. God wills to make us holy. And then He protects His holiness in you. He wants His holiness cherished and celebrated. That's what church is – Christ's holiness is cherished and celebrated and craved and given and learned and preached and heard and sung and consumed. The Light of Christ shines in this place. The world *does not* have the answers. John the Baptist told the delegation who had come to depose him: “among you stands one you do not know” (John 1:26). The world doesn't know of a crucified Savior. “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:10-11). That's the world you live in. “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come into the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:19-20).

That's the world you live in. That's the spiritual reality that is all around you. That is the struggle that is in you, in me. We cannot make it on our own. The church is God's instrument, His creation, His design, His fortress, His kingdom, His temple. A Savior hung on a cross rules this place. His Word, His Spirit, His Life rules this place, rules your life. Sinners are forgiven. Love invades the lowly – Christ's love, an empowering and comforting love. Jesus died and rose again and that Savior rules the cosmos and rules Christ the King Lutheran Church. In this church the glory of God is revealed as Christ is preached and His sacraments are administered. We see Him at work and joy fills our hearts. The way of the Lord is being made straight.