

**Christmas Eve, 2018**  
Brief remarks on 4 Christmas Readings  
By Rev. Michael Gladish

Isaiah 40:1-5 & 9-11

Our focus tonight is on the Lord coming into the world to INSPIRE people about the life that leads to heaven. So in this first reading we see words like COMFORT, and GOOD TIDINGS, and BE NOT AFRAID, and GENTLY LEAD, all of which encourage us to trust in the Lord and know – really know – that He is with us and has the power to provide for us no matter what.

Notice that in the beginning Isaiah said of Jerusalem that her warfare had ended and her iniquity was pardoned. This is referring to the church, and what it means is that when the Lord was born into the world the people in the church could stop fighting over what was right and stop feeling miserable about their lives because He Himself would show them what was right, forgive them for their past mistakes, and comfort them with His love.

But you will also remember from the reading that there was a “voice of one crying in the wilderness” urging people to “PREPARE THE WAY of the LORD.” A wilderness is a place where people often struggle to survive because they have a hard time finding food and protection from dangerous conditions there. We are fortunate that we don’t live in a natural wilderness, but the truth is that when we don’t know what’s really good for us we are in a *spiritual wilderness*, and in some ways that’s even worse.

This is how things were when the Lord came into the world: they just didn’t know how to provide for themselves or protect themselves from wrong, dangerous attitudes and ideas. They needed the Lord to help them! But the Lord can’t help people when they’re not paying attention to His Word, or when they’re too busy serving themselves. So the prophet warned them to PREPARE, and we know that what he meant by that was to stop being so selfish, to straighten out their lives and look to the Lord for guidance. And the promise was that if they did that He would come to their rescue and fill their lives with goodness and peace.

And you know what? It’s exactly the same in our lives today, only the Lord HAS COME and through His life in the world He has provided exactly what we need to stay safe and well. But we still have to PREPARE THE WAY for Him. We have to stop being selfish and learn to listen; we have to straighten up and pay attention to the teachings of the Word; simply put, we have to get our lives in order. THEN we will be able to experience the Lord’s love. THEN we will be able to enjoy His powerful presence in our lives without feeling threatened. And THEN we will be comforted by all the things that He has provided and continues to provide for us every day.

Isaiah 61:1-3 & 8-9

In this reading we learn about all the wonderful things that the Lord was going to do when He came into the world. Just think! – He would preach good news to the poor, heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, free the prisoners, comfort those who are sad, encourage them, and change all their misery to joy!

So did the Lord actually do these things? He certainly did, and He even said so Himself in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 4.... But what does all this really MEAN? After all, there are still brokenhearted, miserable people all over the world, and there are still people in jail.

The question has two answers. First, the Lord did provide His love and wisdom to solve all these problems, but He didn't force people to listen or obey. If they did, then they got the benefits of His work, but if they didn't, then sadly there was nothing He could do because the number one rule for the Lord is that people need to be able to choose whether they want His blessings or not.

It's the same for us today. If we do as the Lord teaches we can be happy and free, but if we don't then we're bound to get into trouble. It's our choice.

That brings us to the second answer, which is that everything mentioned in the lesson is about spiritual conditions and not just natural conditions. For example, spiritual wealth is knowledge, so to be poor spiritually is to have too little knowledge, especially too little knowledge of what is good. So when the Lord preaches good tidings to the poor He is giving them the knowledge they need to be happy and fulfilled. To be a captive or to be in prison spiritually is to be constrained or taken in by believing things that are not true. So when the Lord proclaims liberty to the captives He is telling us the truth that will free us from false ideas. Again, to be sad is to regret the mistakes we have made, so when the Lord comforts those who mourn He is showing them how to correct their mistakes and do better, so they can feel better.

And again, it is the same for each one of us. The Lord came into the world to comfort us with the truth. In fact He referred to the spirit of His truth, the Holy Spirit, as "the Comforter." But He doesn't **make** anybody believe in Him. He just says, "Here I am, and here's what you need to know to find real happiness and peace. I can tell you and I can show you, but YOU have to make up your own mind about whether you want to learn this or not."

This Christmas let's all be sure to thank the Lord for all His generous and merciful work to inspire us and comfort us with the truth that really can make us free.

Luke 1:46-55 & Matthew 1:18-25

In this lesson we are told something about Mary and Joseph, the couple who would care for the Lord when He was born. And we learn much more about why the Lord was born, and what He would do during His life.

Mary, of course, was just thrilled, and in her joy she praised the Lord for this great blessing. Joseph, on the other hand, was not so enthusiastic. He knew that this was not going to be HIS baby and he wasn't sure what to do about that. But when the angel explained it to him he very thoughtfully did the right thing to provide for Mary and the baby.

But let's see what we can learn about the Lord Himself in these two parts of the story. First of all, Mary thanked the Lord for thinking of her and doing "great things" for her so that people forever would call her blessed. But then she went on to say why: "for His mercy is on (all) those who fear Him..." and... He has shown strength with His arm, scattered the proud, put down the mighty, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. These are all things the Lord would do during His life in the world, and they are things He continues to do every day for us. But what does all this mean?

Well, to fear the Lord really means to respect Him, to be afraid to do anything that would disappoint Him. When we have that attitude toward Him His mercy really does make us feel better,

and the strength of His arm, the power of all His work in the world becomes really clear.

But what about scattering the proud, putting down the mighty and sending the rich away empty? These words, proud, mighty and rich, are all describing people who think very highly of themselves, people who are selfish, conceited, and think they know everything. These the Lord can't help *because they don't want any help from Him*, and so they would rather argue with the Lord – and you know, you can never win an argument with the Lord!

On the other hand, as Mary said, the Lord “exalts” or lifts up the lowly, and fills the hungry with good things. These words are describing people who are humble and eager to learn from Him, and THESE the Lord can easily teach and comfort and fill with the good things of His perfect love. So Mary was not just talking about herself here, she was talking about every one of us, and like Mary, we, too, can be very thankful for these blessings.

As for the part about Joseph, remember, the main thing the angel told him about Mary's baby was that “**you** shall call His name, Jesus, for He will **save** His people from their sins.” And then, “**they** shall call His name, Immanuel,” meaning “God with us.” The name, Jesus, actually means HERO, or Savior, and it was the fact that God came down from heaven to *be with us* that makes it possible for Him to fight for us and save us from the wrong and hurtful things we sometimes do to ourselves.

So, like Joseph, we, too, ought to very thoughtfully do what is right to provide for all this work in our lives.

The True Christian Religion #109  
(selections)

Our final lesson tonight compares the time before the Lord came into the world and the time after – which is now. It explains that before He came into the world He let angels inspire and teach people on earth, but now He leads and teaches everyone directly, by Himself. He can do this now because His life in the world is the perfect example of truly Human love and wisdom, and not only that, but by coming into the world the Lord was able to meet the forces of evil and falsity head on, and so take away their power to lead us in the wrong direction. As we read in other places, the Lord brought the evil under control, restored order for the good, and established a church that could really know and love Him.

The problem before His birth into the world was that even the angels were not perfect, and so their influence was not always the best. Of course they tried to be good but even the angels don't know everything, and because people on earth who died and went to heaven often had their own confused ideas, over the years – thousands of years – people on earth became more and more confused by the influences coming from the other world.

So at just the right time, in the crossroads of the ancient world, and in exactly the right way – the way all people are born – the Lord created a natural human body for Himself so that He could teach and lead people here directly through **His own** words and actions. In fact, because angels and other spirits were also present with Him He was also able to teach and lead them at the same time.

So the Lord was able, while He was in the world, to provide the wisdom and the inspiration for ALL who would be willing to receive it. No more do people have to rely on others to tell them what is right or wrong. No more do people have to try to fight against evils and falsities on their own or with the help of others who have their own weaknesses and failings. Now we can all go directly to the Word as it was brought to life and expounded by our Lord, Jesus Christ, and we can see exactly what is good and true, exactly what is merciful and wise, exactly what is useful and orderly for our journey through this natural world on the way to our eternal home in heaven.

As it said in the lesson, the difference between the time before that first Christmas and the time now is like the difference between seeing in a dream at night and seeing in broad daylight, or the difference between the taste of an orange peel and the taste of the orange itself.

So whatever else we do this Christmas, let's be grateful to the Lord for this amazing, joyous gift of being able to know Him well, to love Him in a personal, Human way, and to serve Him, as Zacharias said, "without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life."

Amen.