

**Victory of the Lamb – December 17, 2017 – Pastor Bill Limmer**  
**Isaiah 61:1-3, 10 What the World Needs Now – A special Christmas letter and tree**

I don't know about you but I'm getting excited. The anticipation is building. I love going home at the end of the day and looking at the Christmas cards and letters that we received that day. Have you received a family Christmas letter yet this year? They aren't as popular today as they used to be. Some people don't like them. Some call them brag letters. Personally, I'm ok with people giving me the highlights of their lives. I rejoice with them. Their accomplishments are blessings from God. Here is a letter that we get from some friends from the first congregation I served. I look forward to this every year. Diane has gone from mostly print to pictures with captions. Family Christmas letters usually are one sided, aren't they? I mean, we rarely read in a Christmas letter things like this: In January, I really messed up my marriage; for Valentine's Day we found out our daughter is addicted to pornography; in March our son was sentenced to prison; In April, I knew I should have kept my mouth shut but I didn't and I gossiped and it ripped apart a friendship of someone who I was a dear friend with; in May to get ready for summer we realized we were in too deep and we filed for bankruptcy; And so on signed: Could have done a lot more this year but I was lazy some days and I worried. I worried most of the year and became paralyzed in fear, and didn't accomplish near as much as I could have. We keep the skeleton stories in the closet don't we. We only share part of stories in our letters and at church, right?

But guess what Jesus knows all our stories, even the ones we haven't had enough guts to admit to ourselves. And today, I want to share with you a great news family Christmas letter that gets real about sin, death, love, and victory. And is written by Jesus.

Isaiah 61:1-3 **The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me.** Jesus has been set aside as a member of the Triune God to deliver good news. Jesus is one of a kind. There is no one like him. This isn't bragging. Anyone less wouldn't do. If I lived for you, it wouldn't transform your heart. If I died for you, it might get you out of a momentary jam but would do nothing for your relationship with God and eternal life. But Jesus is different. **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.**" (Acts 4:12) The author of this Christmas letter is Jesus!

Our deliverer, Jesus, says in the Christmas letter that he has come . . . **to proclaim 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.** Jesus knows that as much as we sometimes don't want to admit it we are spiritually poor/afflicted/ bankrupted by sins like greed, ego, jealousy, pride, lust, envy, hatred, injustice, self-righteousness and anger. Our hearts get broken. Dreams get dashed. We are disappointed repeatedly. Consciences are burdened and beaten up. Our thoughts get monopolized by guilt and shame as moments of happiness and joy pass all too quickly and we mourn another failure and another defeat. We suffer from the bitterness of a spouse, the loveless attitude of a parent, and the harsh criticisms of others, bullying, injustice and #metoo. Either we can't escape the consequences of our own failures, or we are controlled by the mistakes and faults of others. We are captive to habitual sin and its consequences. Everything from stinking thinking to sickness to stress to abuse to seizures to surgery to worry, fear and doubt. And at the end of it all our obituary gets written, **"For the wages of sin is death."** And from that point we need, deliverance, intervention if we are going straight into the pit of misery where a Bud Light or two and some Dilly Dilly's won't do jack or squat. Yes, Jesus knows that all of us who were carried into this bitter land of captivity away from God known as sin, with Satan as its ruler.

And that is why Jesus writes this family Christmas letter that he has come to <sup>2</sup> **to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, <sup>3</sup> and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.** The year of the Lord's Favor is a reference to the year of Jubilee in ancient Israel. In the Year of Jubilee, property and people that had been sold to pay debts reverted back to its original owner, debts were forgiven, and those who had been enslaved for their debts were released and their homeland was restored to them. It was to be a great day of joy. What Jesus is saying here is I'm going to pay the price to set you free and bring you back home to God. (Lev 25:8-55)

Now, understand the year of grace and the day of vengeance are the same. The message of God's Word is always Law and Gospel. Vengeance for those who reject God but grace for the spiritually poor, needy, who are at the end of their rope, those who have been burned down to ashes by sin, Satan, doubt and fear, those who are broken hearted, weak, worried and abused Jesus delivers the crown of victory and the oil of joy. The oil of joy is an expression that has its origin in the custom of anointing oneself with aromatic oils on joyous occasions like a wedding. This past year I officiated at like a baker's dozen of weddings. At one of the weddings after I announced that they were husband and wife. The bride looked to the congregation and exclaimed "I'm married y'all." As if to say, "I love him." It was just uncontainable joy. God demonstrates his love to us in this while we were still sinner Christ died for us. Jesus says to you, "I love you." This is the reality of sin and death, love and victory.

Jesus accomplished this by taking on human flesh into his divine being and joining us in our own dark narrative to be our Savior. Jesus delivers good news of great joy shining the light of faith into our darkened hearts of unbelief, bringing healing to our hurting hearts, breaking the bondage to sin, Satan and death by proclaiming freedom and liberty - not with two texting thumbs but with two holy precious blood-stained hands that were nailed to a tree.

What kind of tree do you have in your home? Long needles. Short needles. Raise your hand if it is a real tree. Raise your hand if it is artificial. Raise your hand if you have one kind but really wish it was the other kind. The Kuerth's have a real tree. It's kinda has a bald spot at the top. Any ideas, what name they gave their tree? That's right – Pastor Bill. Next year, I'm going out with them when they cut down their tree. In 2010 in the luxury Emirate Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi they decorated a 43-foot artificial tree with gold and precious stones worth 11 million dollars. Well, my tree and yours don't quite add up to that value, you and I can still look at our Christmas trees with glimmers in our hearts, with the lights glistening in our eyes because Jesus ornamented himself on a tree outside Calvary.

Because Jesus is our deliverer you and I are called . . . **oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.** Those who have heard the Messiah's message and believe are called oaks of righteousness. We are strong like might oak trees – not by our strength but by the strength of the Lord. We are trees of righteousness because we find our righteousness in Jesus not in own often puny and inconsistent attempts at good works. The strength and righteousness of God gives us our strength and life. We are strong because we are nourished on the grace and promises of the Lord. We are enduring trees amid hurricanes and fires of a chaotic, violent, and evil world because the Lord has done everything for us. While our faith is imperfect and fainthearted, we may rejoice that God has clothed us with the threads of his perfect life, death and resurrection victory. The robe of Christ's righteousness is

long and wide enough to cover every sinner's twisted human thought, word, and deed and every accusation of Satan. We shine because of Jesus.

What the World Needs Now, is the same thing you and I need - to read the Christmas letter Jesus wrote in truth and to gaze upon Christ's tree. And there we find the grace that forgives us and prepares us for an eternity of peace and joy. And so along with Isaiah we can say 61:10 **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 his righteousness.**