

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Christmas Day
December 25, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
The greatest news

— Isaiah 52:7-10

There's always been something nostalgic about Christmas. We think back to the past when we celebrated the joy of Christmas as a child. We think back with fond memories when things were simpler. That couldn't be truer this year as we think back to just last Christmas when you gathered with lots of people. We think back to Christmas worship last year when social distance was not a part of our vocabulary and we could greet each other with a firm handshake and a warm hug. Those were the days!

Because of all that has perhaps what we want even more this year than the perfect gift under the tree, is just some good news. We want to hear that the virus is no longer a threat. We want to hear news about peace, not protest. We just want some good news. Can you imagine if this very moment, someone were to burst into the room with the good news that the pandemic is officially over. And not just that restrictions would end, but that the virus has been completely neutralized, the entire population immunized. We can hug the ones we love without fear of spreading disease, schools in our nation could fling the doors open, and all the talk about masks and distancing could just fade into the past. This would-be good news for everyone in the world because there really is not a place on earth that hasn't been impacted in some way or another by a microscopic strain of virus. To hear that a global pandemic is finally over and life can return back to normal would most likely be considered the greatest news anyone could hear in 2020.

Isn't that sad? Isn't it sad to think that the greatest news we can imagine hearing is that life can go back to normal. Isn't it depressing to think that greatest hope of so many in our world is simply that things go back to the way they used to be? Imagine the disappointment if things were to simply return to how they used to be. The goodness of that news would quickly wear off when we realize that even last Christmas pain and sickness still existed and put a damper on our celebrations. The excitement of that shortsighted good news would soon be overshadowed when death still strikes a loved one by some other cause. Even the "good ol' days" brought fear, frustration, anxiety, brokenness, and strain on relationships, because of sin. If things were only as good as they once were what good would that be?

The greatest news we could hear this Christmas is the greatest news we heard last Christmas. To us a child is born. To us a Son is given. The greatest news we could ever hear is that God has given us the greatest gift—his own Son Jesus Christ. Certainly there is nothing new about this news, but this Christmas let's hear it anew with fresh ears eager to hear the greatest news like we're hearing it for the first time. Imagine someone bursts in with the greatest news you've ever heard. He's out of breath as he comes running in; he couldn't get there fast enough to share the good news. He's climbed up an over mountains because you just have to hear the good news. That's the picture that Isaiah paints, ***"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news..."***

What was the greatest news people in Isaiah's day could have heard? If you were an Old Testament believer in Isaiah's day you'd see a lot of troubling things happening in society around you. Idolatry was running rampant. People exchanged the glory of God to worship things that their hands had made. The godlessness and immorality was causing society in Isaiah's day to implode. People were warned. They should have known better as past generations were ruined by their sin and immorality. But instead people in Isaiah's day called evil good and good evil. Where do you find hope if you're a believer in Isaiah's day? Where do you find peace of mind? If you try to find any consolation in the fact that you don't engage in the same sins as society Isaiah would remind you that even your most righteous acts are like filthy rags. Are things around us really any different for us today? Is the sin inside of us any less of a problem for us today than in Isaiah's day? No. When we come to grips with that then Isaiah has the greatest news we've ever heard, ***"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!"***

The greatest news anyone could ever hear whether they were alive in the year 700 B.C. or 2020 A.D. is God himself, proclaiming peace to sinners. The greatest news you could ever hear is the God against whom you have sinned proclaiming to you that your sins are forgiven and he comes in peace. He brings good news, it's not a mixed bag of some good news and some bad news. The greatest news anyone could ever hear is the good news of salvation. So often we only hope for relief and salvation from symptoms caused by sin—symptoms like illness, pain, anxiety, strife—but the greatest news is salvation from sin itself. God doesn't just treat the symptoms; he

pinpoints and treats the cause. Your sins are forgiven. The greatest news anyone living in a hopeless and immoral world could ever hear is the news, "**your God reigns.**" Your God, yes *your* God and Savior is in control. Your God comes with good tidings of comfort and joy and peace.

The greatest news people of Isaiah's day heard wasn't a nostalgic return to the way things used to be. In the past God revealed his glory in different ways but Isaiah foresaw something far greater. "**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.**" Phrases like "God's arm" and "God's hand" were just illustrations using human terms and anatomy to describe God's saving work. It's like God was reaching down from heaven to help his people. But on Christmas we celebrate and relish in the truth the eternal and all-powerful God didn't just figuratively reach his arm down from heaven. As we gaze upon the newborn Christ child again this year, and as we picture a little arm poking out of the swaddling cloths we confess that that little arm is the holy arm of God. God took on our flesh to live in our broken world and to experience from our point of view the devastation of sin and all its consequences. Those arms of the little baby grew into the arms of grown man so that God in human flesh stretched out his holy arms on a cross to bear the sins of the world. Those same arms reached out to terrified disciples on the evening of the first Easter as the risen Jesus said, look, "Touch my hands and see, I have flesh and blood." And he proclaimed, "Peace."

The greatest news we hear today, the greatest hope we have isn't simply a nostalgic return to the way things used to be. But, in part, our Christmas celebration takes us to the past, to a key event and events that took place in human history. But that good news is not ancient history, it's just as relevant today as it was when angels heralded that good news on the first Christmas. Peace! The greatest news as Isaiah had foretold is peace with God. The greatest news is a sure hope beyond this short and difficult life; it is the hope of eternal salvation and life with God through Jesus Christ. "**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!"**"

It's good news for all people of the world because there is not a soul on earth that hasn't been impacted by the devastation of sin. If we know that good news and have heard that good news countless times, and yet we still struggle with sin and disappointment and pain and fear, think of the people who struggle with all those things and yet haven't heard the good news. Just think of how beautiful your feet could be when you come walking into their life with the greatest news anyone could ever hear. But how do we share it? I think this year especially the Lord has given us a unique opportunity to share the greatest news. I've found it very helpful to simply ask the question, "How are you doing this year?" and you don't even have to explain what you mean by that. Try asking that question sincerely and be ready to listen, just listen. And quickly you will find out what has been weighing on that person's heart and mind. Maybe it's fear or frustration or anxiety or stress or exhaustion or maybe it's all of those things at once. But the goal in asking that question isn't so that you gain a hearing to vent your views or opinions or frustrations on the pandemic or other issues. The goal is to gain a hearing to share the hope you have in Christ.

People today, very likely people that you know, are looking for hope somewhere. Maybe it's a nostalgic hope of things going back to how they used to be. Maybe it's fleeting hope in a better tomorrow, but tomorrow brings new struggles and disappointments. You have the greatest news, a message of hope that lasts to eternity. Maybe asking a simple questions like, "how are you are you doing this year?" and listening gives you a chance to share how you've found comfort and peace in Jesus. Maybe it gives you a chance to share the greatest news anyone could ever hear. Maybe you could be the one **who brings good news who proclaims peace, who brings good tidings, who proclaims salvation, who says "Your God reigns!"**