

**St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 18, 2004**

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Isaiah 66:10-14

¹⁰ "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. ¹¹ For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance."

¹² For this is what the LORD says: "I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. ¹³ As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

¹⁴ When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass; the hand of the LORD will be made known to his servants, but his fury will be shown to his foes.

NIV

Praise God for the Church

Sometimes the Christian Church doesn't look so good. If you're like me, when you open the paper and read about the continuing scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, you say, "Ugh." And remember the televangelist scandals of the 80s? "Ugh" again.

Even on a local level, things can get ugly. We at St. Peter are blessed with a congregation in which, by and large, things run smoothly and people get along with each other. But many of you have been in congregations where that has not been the case. Last week's reading from the book of Galatians referred to people in Christian congregations "biting and devouring each other." You know it can happen. And even when it doesn't, sometimes the Christian Church still doesn't look so good. The family of God on this earth has endured financial struggles, boring sermons, dull worship and anemic activities.

There's someone who surely could have identified with us, someone who knew that the family of God sometimes doesn't look so good. His name was Isaiah, the prophet of the LORD in Old Testament times. The family of God didn't look very good through much of the Old Testament. There was corruption. There was worship of false gods and idols mixed in with worship of the true God. There were jaw-dropping scandals. Nobody seemed to care about the words of the LORD. Just last week we heard the prophet Elijah complaining to God; Elijah thought he was the only one left who cared about

the LORD! Isaiah, too, knew it: the family of God sometimes doesn't look so good.

But, oddly, we hear Isaiah write this: Praise God for the Church. Really? Even though it looks like it's falling apart? Even though it's an embarrassment? Praise God for the Church? Why?

Let's listen to Isaiah and find out.

Here there is comfort

What comes to your mind if I say "Merle Avenue"? Hopefully, St. Peter Lutheran Church. Well, in the same way, if you had been alive in Old Testament times and I had said the word, "Jerusalem," you would have thought of the temple. And you probably would have thought of what went on at the temple: that's where the LORD God interfaced with people. For that reason, the name "Jerusalem" became kind of shorthand in the Bible. When the prophets talk about "Jerusalem" they're often talking about the family of God, or believers. New Testament writers picked up on this. For instance, in Revelation, when John the Apostle writes about the family of God finally glorified he calls it the "new Jerusalem." So, in the section of the Bible we're looking at today, "Jerusalem" refers to the family of God, all believers everywhere. Nowadays, in New Testament times, we often call this "the Church," or "the Holy Christian Church," the family of God, made up of all those around the world who believe in the true God.

(Note that when we talk about "Jerusalem" or "the Church" in this way, we're not talking about a visible organization, but rather the group of believers on earth.)

Isaiah writes, Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. In other words, Isaiah says, "Praise God for the Church."

Praising God for the Church wouldn't have come easily for the people who first heard Isaiah's prophecies, however. I mentioned the corruption in the organized, visible church that was there in his time. There were also people who went to church just for show, who went through the motions of worship without really believing anything (can you imagine?). Because of all this God had promised to bring judgment crashing down. Can you see why people would be, as Isaiah says, mourning over Jerusalem?

Nevertheless, there it is: Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. Praise God, Isaiah says, for the Church. But why?

Here's why: "For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance... you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

That brings to mind a familiar picture—a crying baby. What is it that makes babies cry? I know of a couple things. Babies cry when they're hungry. They cry when they're scared. They cry when their diapers are messy.

That's true in a sense for older kids and grown-ups, too, isn't it? We cry when we're hungry, when we don't have something that we need. We are sad when we're scared, when we are afraid of what's coming. And we feel hurt and saddened when we sin and make a mess of things.

Do you know what I mean? Have you even been hungry for love or acceptance—not just from people, I mean, but love and acceptance from God? Have you ever been afraid of the future? Have you ever made a mess or been hurt by somebody else's mess?

The common denominator in all these things is—can you guess?—sin. We hunger for love from God because we sense—and the Bible backs us up on this—that we lack what it takes to make God love us. When we are fearful of the future, our fear is often related to this fact: we know we don't really deserve a whole bunch of blessings from God, but we do have some punishment coming, though we hate to admit it. And messes? Who of us does not have something in his or her past that stinks?

We're hungry for something. We're scared. We've made a mess of things. So where do we go? We go to the Church. We go to the family of God. And there God himself comforts us.

Think about it. What do we see when we come here, gathered with other believers? Well, as the opening hymn put it, "Here are table, font and pulpit. Here the cross has central place."

- + The table or altar is here. Here Jesus feeds us with his own body and blood. And he feeds us with his love and commitment to us. He says, "I gave up my life to take away from your record all the messes you've made. This is my body, this is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." He forgives our past and enables us to face the future.
- + The font is here. Here God washed us and gave us what everybody's conscience hungers for: a good standing in the sight of God. Here God said, "You're mine now. Don't be afraid." Here God removed our filthiness and gave us in exchange a new and spotless life in his sight.
- + The pulpit is here. Here God feeds us with his words. Here he reminds us of what we lack, that we've made messes, as his words expose the things we want to hide. But then he meets our needs by announcing that he forgives us, and he encourages us to live as the new people we are.
- + "Here the cross has central place." The cross sums it all up, doesn't it? God has met our need through Jesus. Through the cross he says, "If I loved you enough to give up my only Son for you, then what good thing won't I give you?"

When babies cry they want mommy. When we are hungering, scared and messed up—always ultimately because of sin—we come to the Church. Here God takes us in his arms as a mother cradles her baby, and he says, “Shh, it’s okay.” Here he bounces us on his knee and cheers us with his love. Here he washes us, feeds us, speaks to us, comforts us.

Praise God for the Church! Here there is comfort.

Here there is peace

Okay, *we* find comfort in the Church, but not everybody does. As people look at the family of God on earth, it often doesn't look very good. The scandals I mentioned earlier, the backbiting, the apathy—these things are not rare. In fact, someone might say that all the Church is is a bunch of sinners!

Well, it is. Look around. Peek out of the corner of your eye. See that person near you? A sinner! And reach out and touch your knee. You just touched a sinner! And think of the men and women who work in our church family: Micheel, Janke, Heyn. All of them sinners!

Kind of disturbing, huh? It's unsettling to see the sins that other people do, to see their weaknesses, their flaws. But what's even more unsettling is to know that we ourselves are sinners and to know that our holy, sinless God hates sin.

But right in the middle of this horde of sinful people Isaiah says, "Praise God for the Church." Here's why: For this is what the LORD says: "I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream... When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass; the hand of the LORD will be made known to his servants." "I will extend peace to her like a river." The LORD will give the Church peace. And not just a little trickle of peace, mind you, but a flood of peace.

You see, God knows that he should be at war with us. He's holy; we're unholy. He's perfectly clean; we're perfectly filthy. He's sinless; we're sinful and sinning all the time. God should go to war with us and crush us. But instead of crushing us, God has made peace with us.

Bible quiz time. Can you think of a verse from Isaiah—no, two verses that include the word "peace"? (Besides this one we're looking at today!) A hint: one is a famous verse at Christmas time: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6) Who is that child? It's Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Jesus came to bring peace between us and God. And the other verse? Hint: we read it every Good Friday: But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us *peace* was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5) Instead of going to war with us and crushing us, God the Father went to war with his only Son, laying on him all the horrifying punishment that we deserved. The result? Because Jesus took our place, we are freed from ever being punished for our sins. In Jesus, we have peace with God.

God has signed a peace treaty with us, signed it in the blood of Jesus. He has promised not to hold our sins against us. And God puts this peace treaty where? In his Church. In and through the gathering of his people he gives peace. When his believers put water on someone's head in his name, God gives his peace. When his ministers distribute the Lord's Supper, God gives

his peace. When the pastor or a fellow Christian forgives our sins, God gives his peace.

Are you unsettled by your sin? Come to the Church; here there is peace with God, as a free gift from him. Are you unsettled by other people's sins? Come to the Church, where we're all a bunch of sinners forgiven by the grace of God, people who are now able to forgive each other as God forgave us.

Praise God for the Church! Here there is peace.

It's true. The family of God, the Church, often doesn't look so good. This side of heaven, we're sinners, and we sin often in shameful ways. But there's something else going on in this bunch of sinners, too. God is here among us. God is here, working through us. God is here, speaking his good news of pardon and peace.

That's why we praise God for the Church. Not because we're so good, but because God is so good. Through this ragtag bunch of forgiven sinners, God himself gives comfort, God himself gives peace.

Praise God for the Church. Amen.