

You may have heard this story before; but I want to share it with you. A man was visiting a town for business and it happened to be on a weekend. On Sunday morning, he wanted to go to a nearby church. Not knowing the area, he left the hotel looking for someone to ask about a place to worship.

But no one was around. Eventually he saw a policeman standing there and asked him for directions to a nearest church.

The policeman was kind enough to give him directions and this man said thank you to him and was about to walk off when he turned and asked the policeman:

"By the way, is there any reason that you recommend that particular church? There must be many churches around here that you could have recommended."

The policeman smiled and replied: "I'm not a church man myself, but I have seen over the years the people who come out of that church are the happiest looking people in town. I thought that would be the kind of church you would like to attend."

I think this man was right on the target; Christian life is about joy and happiness. Of course, there are many kinds of joy and happiness; but Jesus said "the peace I give to you is not the same as what the world gives you" (John 14:27).

I know as Christians we drink the same water as others do; we breathe in the same air as everyone else does in the world. More importantly, we have the same struggles in our lives as others do in their lives.

But we have a good reason to be different. We have Jesus with us, within us, and among us. Jesus gives us a different

kind of peace that we cannot find in the world; it is the peace that comes from above; it is the joy that we do not want to trade with things in the world. The joy we get from God is something we cannot even compare with others.

Sure, we sometimes are concerned about things especially when the going gets tough; we even despair when things do not turn out the way we expected; but when we are filled with the joy that comes from God, we can not only go on in our lives but we also can even rejoice and give thanks to God.

I think that is what the Christian life is about.

This morning, I humble myself before God and you. I want to say thank you to God for who I am and what I am. I have shared with you my personal stories several times, especially on why I became a minister. I just want to tell you once again how blessed I am; I am a happy man not because I have things you do not have; I am a happy man because I have this joy that I get from God.

I know people have different callings; and different people have to do different things; otherwise our society would not function properly.

But I realized this again last week when I was on jury duty; as you can imagine, I was sitting, listening, observing what they had to say and do to us at the court house. And I thought, "Well, I am glad that I am not a lawyer; I am glad I am not a prosecutor or a judge either."

I am just happy for who I am as a minister. I really mean it.

Today, both Old and New Testament lessons have one thing in common. They have this word: joy.

In the first reading from Isaiah, the prophet proclaims that God has sent him to bring "Good News to the poor." He also says that he is sent to comfort all who mourn; to give them a garland instead of ashes.

The second reading, chapter 5 of 1 Thessalonians, also begins with the words "Rejoice always".

You may wonder and say how can we rejoice when there is nothing we can rejoice? How can we show the world that we are happy even though we are not?

But you may be surprised that both texts for this morning came from times when the people of God were not in happy situations; in fact, both books were written when the people of God were having the most difficult challenges in their lives.

This part of Book of Isaiah was written when Israelites were in exile, which means that they were at the lowest point of life.

1 Thessalonians was also written when the early Christians were being persecuted by Romans. If you look up 1:6, for instance, Paul says to his people: "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit."

To the people of God, strength and hope do not come from what we see; joy does not come from what we have either.

You may have heard the story of Alexander the Great. He conquered the known world in his day. Having done so, he wept in his tent, before he said, "There are no more worlds to conquer." Joy does not come from the power you have either.

Real joy comes from God; we can have the garland of joy only from Christ; it is only available to us through the Spirit of God.

As a human being, the prophet Isaiah could not see any sign of hope in his day. But he was able to see what others couldn't see; the reason was simple and clear: the verse one of chapter 64 says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me."

It was not something that came from Isaiah's inside; it was not something he invented out of imagination; it was the spirit of God that helped him to see beyond things; it was the spirit of God that opened his eyes so that he could see hope for his people.

The same thing is true for us.

The only way we can have hope in this world is to be touched by the Spirit of God.

Christmas is around the corner. That is what they say whether we are ready or not.

But I want all of us to feel the touch of God's Spirit in this time of preparation and waiting.

I hope all of us can have a garland of joy on our faces, not because of things we have or we do not have but because of the Spirit of God.

I am positive about this. Once we are full of this joy, the joy from God, the joy from the Spirit, the joy from above, we can live a different life. The world will look different.

Some of you may have seen the program called CNN heroes a few weeks ago. I was just amazed by those people. They were just common people like you and me; but they gave their lives to other people who were in need. When we hear of such amazing people, we see there is hope in this world.

I don't know how these people do what they do. But I am sure that something was inspiring them; each and every one of them had been inspired by the Spirit of God one way or another. I thought they were the ones who give people a garland of Joy.

I want to close with this story.

As a third-century man was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend: "It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret.

They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life.

They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians--and I am one of them." (*Today In The Word*, June, 1988, p. 18).

At this time of year, we need to let such joy into our hearts.

God gives us joy through His Spirit. Let's be touched by it; let's have a garland of joy; and let's share it with others; let's be people who can give others a garland of joy. That's what God wants us to do; that's what we need to do. Amen.