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Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“A Christmas Card For You”

Text: Isaiah 61:1-3; John 1:6-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the things I enjoy about this time of the year is receiving Christmas cards. All the different pictures. All the different messages inside. I enjoy getting a handful of them out of the mailbox. I enjoy looking at the return address sticker to see who I'm hearing from before I open it. I enjoy hanging them up and looking at them all season. And I'm always amazed that of all the cards we receive, there are maybe only one or two repeats. Mostly they are all different. I guess it's good to be Hallmark!

But you know, it occurred to me, I have never seen a Christmas card with John the Baptist on it. Now, I know he's not as cute and cuddly as most of the pictures on cards, what with his camel's hair outfit and his diet of locusts and wild honey! But I think he'd make a pretty good card . . . and can you imagine receiving a card like that? On the outside a picture of John baptizing in the Jordan, with all the people coming out to him; and on the inside you could put the word “Repent!” It would get people's attention, wouldn't it? Just like John did when he came and preached. . . . Well, I don't think Hallmark's going to be coming after me for a job anytime soon!

But did you ever wonder how the people at Hallmark (and the other card companies) come up with their cards – especially the messages inside? Do they just sit around and write verses? Do they have a “Christmas room” they go into to try to get in the Christmas mood when they are writing their Christmas verses in July, so they'll be published and ready by Christmas? . . . Oh, many of the religious cards have Bible verses inside, I think that's good. But it's usually always the same ones: a snippet from the Christmas story from Luke chapter 2; maybe the names of Jesus from Isaiah chapter 9 that we're looking at in our midweek services this year. And so if they don't want to put a picture of John the Baptist on their cards, I do have another suggestion: *put on the inside the first three verses from Isaiah 61 that we heard this morning*. Because those words really do tell us something about Christmas, and why the Son of God came to be wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. They are the words Jesus quoted about Himself when He began His public ministry in the synagogue of His hometown of

Nazareth. And I think they say a whole lot more than the message “*Peace on earth*” . . .

***“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to grant to those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;  
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.”***

This is a message of peace, but not a vague and general kind of peace that you really can't put your hands on – but a very specific, very real, kind of peace. Because these verses really do speak about the kind of places in life where so many people are, especially during the holiday season.

There are people who are poor – poor in spirit, and searching for the holiday spirit; Jesus has come to bring good news to them.

There are people who are brokenhearted, celebrating this holiday for the first time without a loved one; Jesus has come heal and bind up their hearts.

There are people who are captive to sin, to depression, to fear and worry; Jesus has come to set them free.

There are people who are mourning, who feel as dried up as ashes; who have so much junk in their lives and feel like they cannot go on; Jesus has come to give them hope.

For some, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year, but for many, it can be the worst time of the year; the loneliest time of the year; the darkest time of the year. That's why the Christmas season is when most suicides take place. In the midst of so much joy – *maybe most of it manufactured!* – but in the midst of so much joy, it makes one's troubles seem that much worse.

Yet it was exactly to these kinds of people that Jesus came. To those without much joy in their lives. To the outcasts, the sinners, the troubled, the despairing, the mourning, the poor in spirit – sounds almost like the Beatitudes, doesn't it? These ones, Jesus says, are

blessed, for He has come for them. No, not just for them; for us, too. To bring us the good news of sins forgiven. To bind up our broken hearts with His love and the hope of everlasting life. To set us free from our pasts and give a new life and a future. To, as Isaiah said, ***“proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God.”***

And notice how much longer is His favor than his vengeance! His vengeance is only for a day – the day of the cross. The day when He poured out all His wrath and anger against our sin not on us, but on His Son. The day when the sun stopped shining, and the earth quaked at the seeing its Creator crucified by His creatures. That was a day unlike any other day in the history of our world – worse than any of our worst days!

But also, at the same time, it was the most wonderful of days, for it ushered in ***“the year of the Lord’s favor”*** – which is not just a literal year, but a way of saying the time of our Lord’s favor, from beginning to end; and a time much, much longer than the day of His vengeance! For Jesus’ resurrection was also a day unlike any other day in the history of the world – for it *changed* all our days. It changed them because we know that our Saviour is victorious over all our enemies. It changed them because we know that whatever happens to us in this life, there is One greater than all our troubles. It changed them because we know that in Jesus, we have the Lord’s favor. We have His forgiveness. We have His life. He is not angry with us, He is not punishing us, He is not toying with us or playing with us! No! He’s not a far away, disconnected God, but a God who became one of us with His birth. And *truly* one of us. He did not come as a king, living far above all us commoners. He did not come as a powerful one, protected by armies and guards. He did not come to be waited on and served, without any troubles or problems. No, He *truly* came as one of us. All the way down to us. And so He knows. Those who *thought* they were something, He had no patience for! But to those who were downtrodden, filled with troubles, lonely – He came with comfort. True comfort. Not simply a quick “Peace on earth,” but the message and comfort of the cross; the message and comfort of forgiveness; the message and comfort of everlasting life.

And is that not what folks need to hear now? Now, just as much as ever? To hear that ***“the year of the Lord’s favor”*** is not done and over with, but is here and now? For our Saviour is still coming here and now, and still to those who need Him most. To those bent low with burdens, with heavy hearts, captive to sin and death. He is here now as He was then – proclaiming forgiveness in Holy Absolution, giving new life in Holy Baptism, and feeding and strengthening in Holy Communion. Not new things these, but the same gifts our Saviour has always come to give. The gifts He wants to give most of all. The gifts that are here for you not just at one or two times of the year, but all the time. All the time loving you. All the time forgiving you. All the time lifting you up out of the pit of

sin and despair. All the time being your Saviour. Until all the time you live with Him in the everlasting life of your heavenly home.

And that's the message of Christmas. That is bearing witness to the Light as John did. Who we are doesn't matter. The Pharisees and Sadducees came to John, asking him who he was – or, more likely: *just who do you think you are!* But John told them: it doesn't matter who I am. It matters who He is. I'm just the voice. . . . And today, I am the voice sent to you, to proclaim the Light and give His gifts. And you are the voices sent out into the world, to proclaim this Word of hope and life and forgiveness. In your cards, in your words, in your lives. Proclaiming the *true* peace in the only place it can be found. And even if Hallmark isn't interested in our message, there are a whole lot of folks just like us who are! And God is gathering them around you, like He did for John. Bringing them out to you. For you to forgive as you have been forgiven. To love as you have been loved. ***“To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*** To proclaim the fact that that's what makes Christmas *the most wonderful time of the year!*

Now, where's that telephone number for Hallmark . . . ?

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.