

## 1st Sunday after Christmas 2020

**Readings** - Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 147, Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7, John 1:1-18

**Introduction** - Christmas is not a day, actually it is a season. The Christmas season lasts 12 days (yes that's where we source the 12 days of Christmas song) beginning on 25th December and ends with the Epiphany Eve on January 5th. Shakespeare's romantic comedy *12th Night* was written to be performed on the popular 12th night celebrations of the Christmas season.

**Common Theme** - The Biblical and theological message of Christmas is desperately needed in the world today. This message of love, hope, light and life too often gets drowned out by the news and media. God so loved the world, and the Christmas message is very much for the world that He loves. The readings this Sunday highlight the universal nature of God's love and the universal response from all of creation back to God.

**Hebraic Perspective** - The first thing that God created holy in the Bible is time. In Genesis 1 God says of the 7th Day 'This is Holy'. Time is important to God, hence the religious calendar with its observance of sacred time is important to the people of God. Most sacred time is in fact historical. This is to say that holy time usually commemorates a historical event. Whether we celebrate Christmas or not, we cannot say for certain we know the true day of the Messiah's birth. However that does not diminish the important historical truth of Jesus' birth. God once again fulfills His promise to send the redeemer, this is the message of Christmas and is what makes this season a moment of sacred time.

**Reading #1; Isaiah 61:10-62:3** - The prophet Isaiah declares that not only will his own soul rejoice to see God bring about His promise redemption, but that all the nations of the world will see God fulfill His word. Verse 10 declares that, 'righteousness and praise will spring up before all nations' and because of this Isaiah says, 'he will not keep silent'. In the same vain and with the same passion we too must decide that, 'for Zion's sake' we cannot keep the message of the Christmas season quiet.

**Reading #2; Psalm 147** - This psalm is a call to worship. Worship is something we can continue to do in our homes, online and in the small meetings that are permissible. Lockdowns and pandemics should not hinder our desire or ability to worship the Lord this Christmas. The word *hallelujah*, 'praise the Lord', is both an imperative declaration to praise as well as an encouragement for us to do so. The psalm reminds us that it is good to praise the Lord, particularly with singing. At this season Christmas carols beautifully carry the treasured message of Messiah's birth and hope to the nations. Even the secular world enjoys Christmas carols.

**Reading #3; Galatians 3:23-25** - Paul reminds the Galatians that the Law (Torah) was our guardian. The concept is not one of a harsh discipline in which the Law is viewed as mean and nasty, but rather one of protective custody and shield. It is described this way as a good thing. In prayers of the synagogue the Torah is often called the Shield of David or the Shield of Abraham. The Law helped keep sin at bay, however the good news now is that we have the Holy Spirit to do that. The prophets had declared that this would happen.

**Reading #4; John 1:1-18** - 'In the beginning' is an identical phrase to the opening lines of Genesis in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Unlike humans, God does not need a plan B. John is the only Gospel that takes us back to the beginning of time. We are given a glimpse into the mystery that existed before creation. The prophet Isaiah spoke of this

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mystery in Isaiah 48:12-16. Isaiah introduces a being known as the 'First and the Last' in Verse 12 and proceeds to declare that this being fashioned the world in verse 13. Hence we conclude that the First and the Last is indeed God Himself. However the mystery deepens when the prophet says in Verse 16 that God, called the Sovereign Lord, actually sends the First and the Last together with His Spirit. The Gospel of John is not introducing a gnostic greek new theology, instead the mystery that we now declare in the Christmas season was portrayed in the Hebrew prophets long ago.

**Hebraic Context** - John says that, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. The Gospel of John leans heavily on the narrative of Exodus that God dwelt with His people in the desert. Interestingly the text of Exodus 25:8 commands Israel to construct a Tabernacle so that God may live among them ... not in the Tent itself. Here the Hebrew text can also be read as to 'dwell within them'. Exodus spends more chapters describing the construction of the Tabernacle than it does describing the actual exodus from Egypt. And God is in the details. The material used to make the inner sanctuary was called Tachash, a mysterious type of skin. Exodus also tells us it took 9 months to complete the construction of the Tabernacle. Interestingly then it is an ancient Hebrew tradition that says God chose to reside inside skin that took 9 months to fashion.