

**THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS – December 26, 2004
St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI**

OUR GOD RULES! Isaiah 52:7-10

There certainly has been a lot of controversy during this Christmas season. We have heard religious leaders attacking merchants for not having their clerks greet people with "Merry Christmas". Remember years ago when churches were more concerned that the message of Christmas was being overshadowed by commercialism. Now they are concerned that the merchants aren't at least making mention of Christmas. They are attacking merchants for not allowing religious organizations from doing their soliciting outside of their stores as people rush in to buy, buy, buy and give because that's what this season is supposedly all about.

Then you read the articles written about the religious aspects of this season in the popular news magazines of our day and we are treated to the attacks that this whole Christmas story has some facts but lots of fiction and fairy tales. These statements are being made by supposed religious scholars who tell us they know that most of this birth of Jesus stuff is just a bunch of lies that the early Christian church put together to make it sound good and to enhance their leader, Jesus.

It is easy for us to get sucked into all these arguments and lose focus on what our mission and purpose is as followers of the Babe born in Bethlehem. We aren't here to get everyone to say "Merry Christmas". We don't care if religious groups are banned from soliciting outside of department stores. It makes no difference if in our public schools children are taught about Christmas or not. Jesus did not call us to be his children and then send us out to force the institutions of our society to celebrate his birthday. He called you and me to witness to his love and forgiveness. He called us to be his runners to announce good news, to tell people of peace and deliverance. That's a lot different than arguing about whether the clerks at Wal-Mart should be greeting people with the words, "Merry Christmas" or the Target Store allowing people to ring their bells and collect money for the poor and for their church organization.

The message that we have to share and proclaim to everyone is this: **OUR GOD RULES! I) This Is News To Spread and II) It Is A Report That Calls For Rejoicing.**

THE MESSAGE IS BEING SPREAD

Does it seem that God is ruling? Many today would say it appears that Satan is running this world and that God has lost control. In Isaiah's day the same seemed true for the nations of Israel and Judah. During Isaiah's lifetime the nation of Israel ceased to exist as the Assyrians came in and took the northern ten tribes away into captivity never to return. Isaiah also by the power of the Holy Spirit foresaw and prophesied the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians and the destruction of Jerusalem which took place in 586 B.C. In spite of the demise and destruction of God's people, Isaiah foresaw a time when God's people would return and they would be delivered and have true peace. This has happened twice and it will happen one more time. For these prophecies had an immediate fulfillment and then long range fulfillments that happened at the birth of Christ and will happen again at the end of time when Christ returns on the last day. This prophecy was fulfilled after the Babylonian Empire fell to the Medes and Persians and the Jews were freed and allowed to return to Judah to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple of God. This prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus was born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. And this prophecy will be fulfilled one more time when Jesus returns in all his majesty and splendor at the end of time to judge the living and the dead and to take all his followers to be with him in his heavenly and perfect kingdom.

In Isaiah's day they did not have CNN on the ground embedded with the troops so that the people of Israel could watch as the events of a battle took place. They did not have cell phones where they could call their

children on the front lines and learn how they were and what was going on. There were not e-mails and instant messages that could be relayed. You had to wait until the runners were sent back home to inform the citizens how the battle went. Isaiah speaks about the beauty of the feet of those who brought the news. Feet are not necessarily beautiful and glamorous. They are often dirty and smelly. Yet these feet were beautiful not because of their appearance but because of what they were bringing. They were bringing a message that people needed to hear. It was a message of peace. It was good news of rescue and deliverance. The first heralds who came back announced to the people left in Jerusalem that God's people were returning home. They had been freed. They now were at peace with the Medes and Persians. They could return home without fear of imprisonment or death. They had been rescued from their slavery and captivity in Babylon. The second announcers had the joy of telling the shepherds that the Deliverer of the human race had been born. The Prince of Peace had come to this earth to make eternal peace between God and the human race. This is the message that you and I still hear and one that we have the joy and the great privilege to tell others. Isn't it great to know that we are at peace? But are we really at peace? What about the war in Iraq? In Afghanistan? In Bosnia? In Ireland? In Israel? Those wars will continue until the end of time. There will never be true and lasting peace between people. In fact, Jesus tells us that there will be wars and rumors of wars until the end of time. However, we have peace with God. God is no longer angry with us. God's anger with us because of our failure to be perfect and holy as been satisfied because of the work of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, crucified on Calvary and risen from the dead on Easter. We have true peace. We know where we stand with our God. We are sinners, rebellious and imperfect but we are also saints washed clean in the blood of Jesus. You and I know where we stand with our God. We know our final outcome. We will live with the Lord forever because he has come and he has rescued his people. He has set us free from sin's chains and slavery, just as the Lord set his people free from the bondage they experienced in Babylon.

THE NEWS CALLS FOR REJOICING

This good news calls for a response. It calls for rejoicing and celebrating. That's what we Christians are doing during this Christmas season. Should we demand that merchants celebrate this with us? They can't if they don't know the news. If they haven't heard the report, how can they break forth in joy? This celebrating is not one of giving gifts and spending as much money as we can, because then we are having a Merry Christmas. It's not going out and getting drunk because that supposedly is celebrating. It is telling others, "Our God Rules!" Isaiah writes, "Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes." (v. 8) The watchmen on the city gates were to alert the people of the city of any event or impending attack. They were the warning sirens that announced both good news and bad news. The news they had to announce was great. Listen to what the prophet foretold, "for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. 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." (Vv. 9b-10) When the Jews returned home the Lord comforted and consoled them. He assured them that he was with them. He redeemed them. He bought them back and returned them to the Promised Land. The Lord had comforted and consoled you and me. He has bought us back. We belong to him. He paid the price to rescue and set us free. It cost God the life of his only Son. He did this willingly because he loves us. For God is love. When he finally comes again he will lay bare his holy arm. When someone shows off their bare arm with their muscles, they are showing off their strength and power. Jesus will do that at the end of time when he returns to judge all people. Then his power and might will be made known to all the nations and people of this earth. Then everyone will see the salvation of our God.

When your team wins an athletic contest, there is a lot of celebrating, shouting, hugging and rejoicing. We have reasons as the children of God and people who have been brought by the Holy Spirit to trust in Jesus to shout and celebrate during this Christmas season. For our God reigns. It may not always be evident to many people in this world, but we know that he rules. He is in charge and he is doing what is best for his people, his Holy Christian Church.

During this Christmas season we need to keep that message before ourselves and we need to be like the runners of old, busy taking that message to others and sharing it with them. For this is a time to rejoice and be glad. We have a message that has changed our lives and it is a message that has the power to change the lives of every person on this planet. May God use our beautiful feet to announce good news, peace and deliverance to all we have contact with in our lives.

Amen.