

ADVENT III: THE BIRTH OF JOY

(12/13/09)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-19
Luke 2:8-14
Romans 15:13

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. This Advent season we have been trying to view Christmas through the eyes of Mary the mother of Jesus. We have attempted to rediscover the historical Mary. We have also explored what it would mean for us to be like Mary, a vessel or container for the birth of our Lord.

Each Sunday of Advent we explore one of the four traditional gifts of Christmas: hope, peace, joy, and love. We think about what it would mean to give birth to these feelings or attitudes in our lives, to bring them into the world, so to speak. When we do this, we give birth to the Christ, the source of all these gifts.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of rejoicing. However, I am not finding Christmas to be a particularly joyous experience this year.

When I called Bob L'Heureux this past week to give him the title of my sermon, and we chatted a little about the state of affairs in our country and around the world, he suggested that it might be more appropriate to list my sermon as “Joy” followed by a question mark. As he pointed out, we could probably have done the same with my sermon on peace. This leaves us with only hope and love as the two Advent gifts, the two unshakable affirmations of Advent. Even then, one could question whether hope for a just and lasting peace is realistic, and one could question the ability or the will of the inhabitants of this planet to accept, let alone love one another as Jesus tells us to do.

We are not only nearing the end of a year, we are nearing the end of a decade. When I look back over the past ten years, the 2001 terrorist attacks on our country and the ongoing terrorist attacks and suicide bombings of innocent civilians in many other

areas of the world hang over my New Year's celebration like a cloud. I find it difficult to be merry when I think of how the people of Iraq and Afghanistan have suffered over the past decade, when I think of our young men and women who have been or still are stationed there, many of whom will be returning with traumatic brain injury or traumatic stress disorder, that is, if they return at all.

I find it difficult to be merry when so many people in our country are unemployed and so many others have lost their houses or are having difficulty making ends meet. We shouldn't have people in our country go to bed hungry, and yet we do. We shouldn't have people in our country who are unable to obtain essential and high quality medical care, and yet we do.

As I look out on this congregation, I am reminded of the hardships and losses many of you have experienced this past year. I think of those of you who are living with debilitating illnesses or who suffer from chronic pain. I think of those of you who are doing battle with cancer. I think of those of you who are realistically concerned about the future for one reason or another. When I think of some of your struggles, and when I read through the names of those members or friends of our church family who are on our prayer list, I experience feelings of hope and faith, but I find it difficult to connect what anything I would call joy.

Just yesterday, Skip Willman mentioned that a church in York, Maine has scheduled what they call a "Blue Christmas" worship service. This type of service, as I understand it, is a response to what has been called "the holiday syndrome." There are many, particularly those who have lost loved ones in the recent or distant past, who will not only find it difficult to be merry this Christmas, they will feel a poignant sorrow. This service is an affirmation of those feelings, a reassurance that it is "ok" to feel blue at Christmas, particularly when there is something to feel blue about. I wonder whether, during the service, they might play the song "It's a Blue, Blue Christmas Without You."

When Skip, Sharon and I discussed the possibility of having such a service in our church, we thought about who might have reason to attend. Then we decided that a much smaller list would be the names of those who have no reason to attend, whose celebration of Christmas this year will not be touched with feelings of sadness.

I find it difficult to preach about joy. It isn't a word that captures the essence of my spiritual journey. I don't know anyone in the world who is happier with his/her life than I am. If someone told me they would pay me a hundred million dollars to do something else with the rest of my life, I wouldn't be tempted even for a split second. Well, maybe for a split second. But I would describe the feeling I get from my personal life, from my spiritual journey, and from my work as a feeling of deep satisfaction, the satisfaction of doing what I know I am called to do: help reduce or ameliorate suffering by helping people live more meaningful and deeply spiritual lives. But I wouldn't describe what I feel as an experience of joy.

Perhaps we need to think about the word "joy." Webster defines joy as "the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying." The problem is that when something is beautiful or deeply meaningful to me, I don't tend to experience "great delight." When an experience touches something deep within me, it is more apt to move me to tears. Our communion service touches me this way. Our Christmas Eve candlelight service touches me this way. The extinguishing of the candles as we read the story of our Lord's passion on Maundy Thursday touches me this way. But is this the emotion or the experience of joy?

When we turn to the Bible, we find the word "joy" used in many different ways. In the Old Testament it is tied to the happiness derived from sexual love (Song of Solomon 1:4), married life (Proverbs 5:18), the birth of children (Psalm 113:9), the pleasures of harvest (Deuteronomy 26:1-11), and feasting (Ecclesiastes 8:15). I know all these experiences, except the pleasures of harvest (because I don't have a garden), and I celebrate them in my life. But I'm not sure I would use the word "joy" to describe them.

There are also passages about joy in the Old Testament that I find troubling. In Psalms 58:10, those who are righteous are invited to look “with joy” upon acts of divine vengeance. The New Revised Standard Version’ translation of this psalm reads,

*The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.*

I have to admit that I sometimes experience a feeling of satisfaction when I discover that justice has been served and that some particular person has received his/her just deserts. I guess I’ve just never been filled with enough hatred to associate the wreaking of divine vengeance on a particular person with anything I would call joy.

The ancient Israelites, probably because of their constant oppression, looked forward with great anticipation to the joy that would accompany their future deliverance by God. In Isaiah 65:17-19, which we heard this morning, God says,

*For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.*

The ancient Israelites used the word joy to describe their entry into the “new Jerusalem” for which they longed, the final realization of God’s will for them and for all humankind.

Because the early Christians believed that the advent of Jesus marked the inbreaking of God’s final redemptive act, the eschatological joy for which Israel longed became associated with Jesus. This motif is particularly strong in Luke’s gospel, where the birth of Jesus gives rise to an outpouring of human and heavenly joy. Jesus’ ministry (Luke 10:17) and his resurrection (Luke 24:52) evoke the same response.

Perhaps this is the key to our experience of joy this Christmas season. Perhaps we should not be looking for a feeling of delight or ecstasy. Those feelings may come to us at various times in our lives, usually evoked by some specific circumstance, but

the feeling passes quickly. This can't be what Isaiah meant. Isaiah was talking about a new creation, not only new heaven but also a new earth, a new creation not only in the world but also within us. To know that this "new Jerusalem" of which Isaiah speaks is even now being created inside us is to experience joy. To know that God is creating new life inside us through the Holy Spirit is to experience a joy touched with humility and gratitude.

Luke wasn't talking about the joy of a good meal. The Buddhists remind us that the joy of a good meal passes in a few hours and we become hungry once again. He also couldn't have been talking about the joy of married life. If Luke was married or had children, he would have known that these two deeply meaningful dimensions of life are not always accompanied by joy. The joy which the angel proclaims is the joy which comes when we know that the Savior for which Israel longed and for which we all long has become incarnate in the world and inside us. When we experience this wondrous miracle of God's love we are touched by joy.

I don't think joy needs to be tied to happiness or delight. When we pass the light of our candle to the person sitting next to us on Christmas Eve, when we see our beautiful sanctuary bathed in the light of those candles and when we join together in the singing of "Silent Night," aren't we experiencing a quiet feeling of joy? This must be the kind of joy that Mary experienced when she said,

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*

This must be the kind of quiet joy that Mary experienced when she took the words of the angels that had been told to her by the shepherds,

*treasured all these words
and pondered them in her heart.*

In the 16th psalm, verse 11, the psalmist speaks of joy, the kind of joy that comes when we live our life in the presence of God. He says,

*You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

The apostle Peter quotes this verse in slightly different words when he reminds his listeners in Jerusalem of the words of King David:

*You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence. (Acts 2:28)*

I think this is the deepest meaning of joy: the feeling that comes from knowing the Way of life and walking the path of life; the fullness of joy that comes when we not only believe that God walks with us, but when we experience God's presence in our daily life. This is the kind of joy that does not leave us when we, in the words of the 23rd psalm, "walk through the valley of deep darkness."

In a world that is often tinged with darkness, in the midst of the struggles and losses of our own lives, I wish us not a merry Christmas, but a Christmas filled with hope, peace, love, and a quiet joy.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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PASTORAL PRAYER -- THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Almighty God,

We meet today to thank you and praise you for this most blessed season. We thank you that you loved the world so much that you sent your son to bring light to those who dwell in darkness. We thank you for the hope, the peace, the joy, and the love that he brought to us and to people everywhere.

Forgive us, God, for not making a suitable place for the Christ child in our lives. Forgive us for the many times when the coldness of our hearts closed us to you and to those we love. Forgive us for not being open to the many unexpected ways you encounter us, for not recognizing you in your creation. Forgive us for centering our energies on our personal desires to the extent that we forget those of your children, our brothers and sisters, who are in great need.

O God, help us to humbly receive the gifts you give us, the gifts that make us not only human but divine. Help us to recognize these gifts especially when they come during dark and difficult times. We need to remember that even at the times when we feel most alone, you reach out to us just as you reached out to the world in the child of Bethlehem so many years ago.

Touch us with the beauty of this season. Touch us with the beauty of this sanctuary and this worship service. Touch us with the powerful message of our Advent and Christmas hymns and anthems. If shepherds can be transformed through hearing your word and if wise men return home different than they were when they departed, do not let us leave this service and this season the same as when we came. Lift each of us into the presence of your love in such a way that we will be changed as a result of hearing once again how you came to earth to be among your people.

There are many who are not able to be with us during this Christmas season because of illness or distance. Be with us and with them that we may not only feel but be deeply connected in your love. For those who have passed on, leaving an empty

place both at the Christmas table and in our hearts, help them to know that they are held in our hearts and prayers and help us to know that they are with us in spirit not only during this blessed season but through all the seasons of our lives.

O God, we thank you for the grace we have received from you and which we continue to receive through the outpouring of your Holy Spirit into our hearts. In these moments of silent prayer, we ask that those whom we know to be in great need will experience an unexpected breaking in of this grace. We hold them in our prayers.

In the spirit of the Christ-child, the child of Bethlehem, we ask this our sanctuary prayer and our many prayers both spoken and unspoken. Amen.