

ADVENT 3 -- JOY

(12/17/17)

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

“But the angel said to them [the shepherds], ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing to you good news of a great joy for all the people.’” (Luke 2:10)

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Each Sunday of Advent we light one of the candles on our Advent wreath and reflect on the spiritual gift symbolized by that candle. We think about what it would mean to give birth to hope, peace, joy, and love in our lives, to bring them into the world, so to speak. When we do this, we give birth to the Christ, for the Christ is the incarnation of these gifts.

Advent is a time of waiting. We all know what it means to wait. We sit at an intersection waiting for the light to turn green. We act as if green were good and red were bad. We regard red as an interruption in our headlong flight through life. But is it? Perhaps red is exactly what we need. Perhaps we need to slow down, look around and enjoy the moment. If we transition from our fixation with our future to a deeper experience of the present, we might enjoy the beautiful shade of red in the light, the shape of the tree that is next to the intersection, the unusual architectural features of the buildings around us.

We know what it means to wait. We sit at a table in a restaurant waiting for the waitress to take our order. Then we wait for the food to arrive. Then we wait for the bill. We act as though the completed act of eating and leaving the restaurant were the goal. But is it? Perhaps we should relax and enjoy the company of the person with whom we dine. Perhaps we need to slow down, take our time, and enjoy the meal. When Darlene and I spent a week in Paris, celebrating our fiftieth wedding anniversary, we thought nothing of spending three or four hours in a restaurant. The speed of life was slower. I liked it. Now that we have returned home, I realize that I am once again eating much too quickly, eating with much less enjoyment.

Young people can't wait until they become adults. Those of us who are adults know that being an adult is not all it's cracked up to be! We would advise these impatient young people to not be in such a hurry. We would tell them to enjoy their childhood or adolescence, to enjoy the experience of being right where they are in life. We would tell them to live and cherish each of

the seasons of life. As we know, winter comes much too quickly. Winter comes much too quickly.

Waiting can have the unfortunate consequence of concentrating our focus on the future, thereby pulling us out of the present. Yet the present is the only time that is real. It won't do you any good to wish this worship service were over so you can go home and watch the New England Patriots. Besides, after their embarrassing loss to the Dolphins this past week, I am not sure if watching them play the Pittsburgh Steelers will prove to be a joyous experience. But that's not the point. The point is that if you are impatient for the service to end, you might miss some little part or parts of the service that might have touched you deeply, that could have spoken to you, that would have proved comforting, illuminating, or challenging.

Advent is not only about waiting; it is also about preparation. The best preparation for something that is expected in the future is to live fully in the present. We saw this in the themes of each of the first two Advent candles.

The first week of Advent we lit the candle of hope. Hope is the affirmation that life moves forward. It is an affirmation of the ongoing creation and evolution of life, of our own creation and evolution. This trust in the process of life can sustain us when we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness. It is built on the memory of all we have already experienced, all we have already endured. We need to remember those times when we felt overwhelmed, afraid, depressed, or lost. Even though we thought we could not survive these dark times, we did. Even though we thought the pain would never end, it did. Or at least it became more bearable.

Hope establishes goals toward which we aim, for which we strive. It helps us move forward into the future with confidence. A person without hope cannot live fully in the present because the opposite of hope is despair, and despair pulls us out of the present, out of the great flow of life.

The people of Jesus' day had many hopes. Once they became aware of his great wisdom, his great power, they fastened many of these hopes on him. When he did not fulfill their dreams, when he did not satisfy their desires, they turned on him. They were so lost in the specificity of their hopes and dreams that they threw away the Son of God who was standing in their midst.

The danger of hope is its focus on the future rather than the present. We hope we will win the lottery, mistakenly believing that once we become rich we will be happy. We hope that the people in our lives, family members, will change as we wish them to change, to behave as we

wish them to behave. Then we will be able to love them. By living in the future, we denigrate the present. We throw away the loving connection with others and with life that is the real gold.

Last Sunday, we lit the candle of peace. We pray for that peace which Webster defines as the absence of international conflict, for the time when nations and groups of people live together in harmony. We long for that inner peace which is the absence of anxiety, of worry about the future, about those parts of life we cannot control. We long for the experience of tranquility or serenity. Accompanying this experience of inner peace is the experience of inner stillness or silence. Or perhaps it is the other way around. When we become silent and still, we become more peaceful. This can happen in prayer as we enter into the great silence, the great mystery, the great peace of God.

Peace, however, is more than the absence of conflict. We cannot have peace in our world without justice. Jesus confronted the religious authorities of his day, just as Martin Luther King, Jr. did with the secular and political authorities of his day. If people of vision do not confront injustice, do not stand up to evil our nation and our civilization will not evolve. As we take a stand against the racism, the inequities of our time and our society, we may even raise the consciousness of those whose beliefs we oppose. Just as Mahatma Gandhi called forth the conscience of the British to bring colonialism to an end in India, so also we, in our own little way, might call forth people into a life that is not defined by narrow tribalism and fear.

This morning, we lit the candle of joy. Webster defines joy as “the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying.” I don’t find this definition helpful, at least in understanding that dimension of joy that is spoken of in scripture. This is because I think of joy as more than “great delight” or “happiness.”

Think of what the word “joy” means to you. I’m not talking about a definition, because words may not do justice to this experience. Think of several moments in your life when you experienced what *you* would call joy. Someone else might not classify the feelings of that moment as joy, even if they were to have the exact same experience. But you did. Joy, you see, is intensely personal.

I can think of a few examples in my life of joy or what Abraham Maslow called a peak experience. I tend to limit it to a few because I reserve this term for special experiences, the living of special moments. I guess I want to keep it a special term. So a lot of the experiences

that others might refer to as joyous experiences, I would call moments of pleasure, happiness, or deep satisfaction.

I might be wrong, but I think joy happens only when something special breaks into our life. It does not usually come as the fruit of our own labors. It arises as an emotional response to an encounter with God, an encounter with the transcendent dimension of life. This is why the shepherds experienced joy at the birth of the Christ child. The angels burst into their lives and opened them up to the precious gift that was lying in the manger. Joy is what happens when God breaks through our defenses and touches us deeply, touches our very soul.

C. S. Lewis, in one of his books, spoke of being “surprised by joy.” I think we can be surprised by joy in many ways. It can touch us on those rare and special moments that we just brought to mind. It can also happen more often than we think. It could actually become a daily experience.

The ancient Israelites, because of their oppression, looked forward with great anticipation to the joy that would accompany their future deliverance by God. In Isaiah 65:17-19, 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 Israelites used the word joy to describe the experience of the new Jerusalem, the final realization of God’s will for them and for humankind. But what if we are the new Jerusalem? What if we are meant to bring joy to others and to the earth?

Because the early Christians believed that the birth of Jesus marked the in-breaking of God’s final redemptive act, all the eschatological joy for which Israel had longed was now 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 they pass just as quickly. This can’t be what Isaiah meant. Isaiah was talking about a new creation, not only a new heaven

but also a new earth, a new creation not only in the world but also within us. To know that the new Jerusalem 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 joy, a joy touched with humility and gratitude.

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.*

Finally, I think joy is inextricably linked to sorrow. Webster tells us that the opposite of joy is sorrow. But are they opposites or do they contain each other? The joy which Mary experienced at the gift of her child must have also been touched by sorrow, sorrow at the gift of myrrh which presaged the premature death of her son. I am not sure sorrow and joy can be separated. The greater our capacity for sorrow, the greater will be our capacity for joy. Perhaps this is what we experience in the loss of loved ones; for there would be no sorrow had there not also been the experience of joy and a very deep love.

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

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December 17, 2017*