

ADVENT 3: THE INCARNATION OF JOY

(12/15/2019)

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

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

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. This Advent season we are trying to view Christmas through the eyes of Mary the mother of Jesus. We are trying to understand 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, these gifts or fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to incarnate them, to bring them into the world of space and time.

This morning, Lou, Jen, and Olivia relit the candles of hope and peace in our Advent wreath; then they lit the candle of joy. As we sing the Advent and Christmas hymns that touch on the theme of joy, as we reflect on what it would mean to incarnate joy, to give birth to joy in our lives, we are only too aware that many people are not experiencing joy in this Christmas season.

This has been a difficult year. The shadow of the recent terrorist attack at the Pensacola naval air base and other mass shootings in our country; the ongoing war in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; the ongoing genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar; and the rise of fascist, totalitarian regimes around the world hang over our holiday season like a cloud. We are facing a national election in the coming year, an election that, no matter who wins, promises to have an increasingly polarizing effect on our people. We are deeply troubled by the feelings of hatred that have been expressed and also acted out toward people based on their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender. Something very primitive and regressive within us and within our nation has been released, something that we could actually call demonic.

I find it difficult to be merry when I realize that the destructive effects of climate change are not a future threat but a present reality. We recently learned that the glaciers in Greenland are receding at an alarming rate, that we have lost four trillion tons of ice there since 1992, and that the centimeter of global sea rise from this loss means that approximately six million people will

be assaulted by increased seasonal floods. I find it difficult to be merry when so many of our young men and women return from combat duty suffering from traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, a spectrum of physical and psychological wounds, and we fail to manifest the collective resolve to care for them.

I find it difficult to be merry when so many people in our country are struggling financially, 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 medical care for themselves or their children, and yet over twenty-seven million do. We should be ashamed of ourselves when corporate executives draw obscene salaries while one in ten senior citizens in our country lives under the poverty line, and ten million Americans over age 65 have an annual income of less than \$10,800.

As I look out upon this congregation, I am reminded of the losses that many of us have experienced. I think of those whose names appear on our prayer list, friends or loved ones who are struggling with serious illness. When I think of the opportunity we have to share our burdens with God and with each other, the opportunity to work together to create a better world, I experience strong feelings of hope and faith, but I confess that I find it difficult to connect with anything I would call joy.

Within the United Church of Christ, the denomination in which I am ordained, some churches hold what they call a "Blue Christmas" worship service. This is in response to what has been called the holiday syndrome, the realization that those who have lost loved ones in the recent or distant past will not only find it difficult to be merry this Christmas, they will feel a poignant sorrow. This service is intended to reassure us that it is "ok" to feel depressed at Christmas when there is an empty chair at the table. I wonder whether during these services they will play the song "It's a Blue, Blue Christmas Without You."

I thought about making a list of those within our church family who might have reason to attend a service like this if we were to offer it. Then I realized that a much smaller list would be the names of those who have no reason to attend, those whose celebration of Christmas will not be touched with feelings of sadness. To those of us who *would* have reason to attend, we need to challenge the extra layer of pain that comes when we feel guilty for feeling the way we do, when we feel that there is something wrong with us for not wanting to set up a tree this year, when we

carry the extra burden of feeling like a failure because our home does not match the warm and fuzzy Currier & Ives prints. We need to remember that we can't force feelings of joy when none are there. We just have to be where we are, and that's okay.

I confess that the word "joy" isn't a word that captures my basic feeling response to life (at least I don't think it does). 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, something other than what I am doing, I wouldn't be tempted even for a split second. (Well, maybe for a split second, because then I could get a new BMW.) But I would describe the feeling that arises from my years of work as a teacher, psychologist, and minister as a feeling of deep satisfaction, the satisfaction of doing what I know I am called to do with my life--help people eliminate or transcend suffering by learning how to live more meaningful, fulfilling, 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. For some unknown reason our communion service two weeks ago touched me this way. Our Christmas Eve candlelight service always 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 feeling of deep connection or presence the emotion or the experience of joy?

The word "joy" appears in several different contexts in the Bible. In the Old Testament it is tied to the happiness derived from 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). Each one has brought me great pleasure (and also, I confess, a little pain). But I'm not sure I would use the word "joy" to describe my feelings in relation to them.

There are also passages about joy in the Old Testament that I find troubling. In Psalm 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 *Shadenfreude*, 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 evolution into the “new Jerusalem” for which they longed, the final realization of God’s will for them and for all humankind.

The phrase that strikes me is “be glad and rejoice in what I am creating.” *Rejoice in what God is creating!* Rejoice in the realization that God is creating something new and special in you; that God is creating something special in the world (even though it may not seem this way right now); and that God is creating something special in the world through you. If you know this is true, you will know the deeper meaning of joy.

True joy is deeper than delight or happiness. To know that God is bringing light to our darkness, healing to our brokenness, and that the Holy Spirit is creating new life out of the chaos in our world is to experience a joy touched with humility and gratitude.

The early Christians believed that the birth of Jesus marked the inbreaking of God’s final redemptive act of salvation. This motif finds expression in Luke’s gospel where the birth of Jesus gives rise to an outpouring of human and heavenly joy. The angel tells the shepherds,

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of a great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

The joy which the angel proclaims is the joy that comes when we know that the Savior for which we long has become incarnate both in the world and in us. When we experience this wondrous miracle of God's love we are touched by a deep joy!

True joy, a joy grounded in the spiritual dimension of life, goes much deeper than 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.*

I think the psalmist knew this deeper meaning of joy. In the 16th psalm, verse 11, he speaks of 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.*

In your presence there is fullness of joy. The apostle Peter quotes this verse in slightly different words when he reminds his listeners in Jerusalem,

*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 the deepest meaning of joy is the feeling that comes when we experience God's presence with us and within us in our daily life. This is the kind of joy that does not leave us even when, in the words of the 23rd psalm, we "walk through the valley of deep darkness."

Christmas is the assurance that God is here with us and with our world. God brings light to our darkness and healing to our brokenness. How else could we explain all the beautiful and loving things that happen each and every day? And they do! They happen every day in big ways and in small, and every single one of them helps to incarnate the kingdom of God on earth.

We help to usher in God's kingdom on earth when we stand up to hatred and bigotry, when we defend our brothers and sisters who are the victims of prejudice. We help to usher in God's kingdom when we reach out to those in need in our country and around the world. Every single time we say or do something caring, something loving to each other, we give birth to the Christ child in us and in our world.

In a world 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 and deeply spiritual joy.

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