

ADVENT 3: INCARNATE JOY!

(12/11/2022)

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. Advent is a time of preparation. In our Advent worship we prepare ourselves for not only the celebration but also the experience of Christmas. Advent helps us to prepare for the birth, the incarnation of the Christ child in our lives and then, through us, to incarnate his presence and his message in the world.

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, these attitudes, these gifts, which are essentially fruits of the Holy Spirit, in our lives. We think about what it would mean to incarnate these gifts, to bring them into the world of space and time, just as Mary did with the baby Jesus.

This morning, David and Barbara 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 experience joy, 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. Even some of our own people.

This has been a difficult year. We need only think about the continuing destruction of the environment, the continuing effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the ongoing brutal war in Ukraine, the polarization of political parties, the tribalization of people, the rise of fascism and antisemitism, the continuing evil of white supremacy, of white heterosexual Christian nationalism, etc., but I don't think it would be a good idea to dwell on these concerns—especially since they are complex issues, difficult to solve, and the theme of our worship service this morning is joy.

To be honest, I find it difficult to be merry when so many people in our country are struggling financially, when so many people 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. The number of billionaires in our country increases every year, while one in ten senior citizens lives under the poverty line, and ten million Americans over age 65 have an annual income of less than \$10,800. I am a big fan of capitalism, but I think our

brand of capitalism needs a reworking. When we look at its effects on the majority of our people, we cannot escape the conclusion that we are doing something wrong.

As I look out upon this congregation, I am reminded of the losses that many of us have experienced. I think of the people whose names appear on our prayer list, friends or loved ones who are struggling with serious illness or who are going through difficult times. When I think of how we, as a community of faith, can share our burdens with God and with each other; when I celebrate our commitment to work together to create a better world, I experience strong feelings of hope and faith. However, I confess that I find it difficult to connect on a feeling level with anything that 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 thought about making a list of those within our church family who might have reason to attend a service like this were we to offer it. Then I realized that a much smaller list would be the names of those who would 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 believe there is something wrong with us because our home and family 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 are 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 billion dollars, which would put me at about half of Elon Musk territory, to do something other than what I am presently doing for the rest of my life, I wouldn’t be tempted even for a split second. (Well, maybe for a split second, because with a hundred billion dollars I could get a new Tesla or BMW.) My ministry as a teacher, psychologist, and pastor, fill me with 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. However, I wouldn’t describe this feeling of deep satisfaction as an experience, an incarnation 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 last week touched me this way. The beauties of nature, of a starry sky touch me this way. Spending time with my little grandson or granddaughter touches me this way. But is this feeling of deep connection or presence the emotion or the experience of joy? Perhaps it really is.

Many of the passages in the Bible that speak of joy, which call us to rejoice, are not particularly helpful to us in our quest to understand the deeper meaning 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, nor do I want one. Each one has brought me great pleasure--and 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 we Christians should 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 admit that I sometimes experience *Schadenfreude*, a feeling of satisfaction when I discover that some person, usually someone I dislike, has received his/her just desserts. And yes, I am thinking about a specific person on a national level. I guess I’ve never been filled with enough hatred to associate the administration of justice or the wreaking of divine vengeance on a person I dislike 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. Rejoice in the realization that God is creating something special in the world (even though it may not seem this way right now). And rejoice in the realization that God is creating something special in the world through you. If you know this is true, if you can feel it, you will know the deeper meaning of joy.

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

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 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 at our Christmas Eve service, when we see our beautiful sanctuary bathed in the light of those candles and when we join 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. As recorded in Acts 2:28, 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.*

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."

And so we sing our hymns of joy during this Advent and Christmas season. *Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates*, which George Weissel extrapolated from Psalm 24, tells us,

*Fling wide the portals of your heart;
Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ
Adorned with prayer, and love, and joy.*

And the hymn, *Joy to the World*, from Isaac Watts's reflection on Psalm 98, tells us,

*Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy.*

Hopefully (hope fully), we can sing our hymns of joy even though a "thick darkness" covers not only the nations but our nation as well. We can sing our hymns of joy even though a thick darkness touches or colors our lives and the lives of those whom we love. If we can experience this deeper meaning of joy, we can sing these hymns with hope, with a deep longing.

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 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, amid 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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