

ADVENT III -- THE ANSWER TO FEAR IS JOY!

(12/17/2023)

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

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

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

Advent is a time of waiting. We know what it means to wait. We sit impatiently at an intersection waiting for the traffic 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, enjoy the moment. If we move from our fixation with the future to an experience of the present, which is exactly what mindfulness invites us to do, we might enjoy the 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. Or we could just breathe.

This past Tuesday afternoon, in our Spiritual Study and Growth Group, where we are reading and discussing Matthew Fox’s book entitled, *Meister Eckhart: A Mystic Warrior for Our Times*, we discussed the parallels between this thirteenth century German mystic and the modern Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh. Both of these mystics believe that when Jesus taught about the kingdom of God as an inner spiritual experience, which is actually what he was talking about, he was calling us to realize and embrace our grounding in the presence of the Holy Spirit *in the present moment*. Thich Nhat Hanh equates the Holy Spirit of Christianity with mindfulness and enlightenment. He says, “For me, the Holy Spirit is mindfulness itself.” In relation to the Christian Trinity, Thich Nhat Hanh says, “We have the capacity to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit whenever and wherever it manifests. It, too, is the presence of mindfulness, understanding, and love, the energy that animates and helps us recognize the living Christ.”

According to Meister Eckhart, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Jesus, dwelling in the Kingdom of God that is the present moment also involves paying attention to and responding to the suffering

of the world. It leads us to be involved with the world, to serve the world in a loving, caring, compassionate way. And joy is a qualitative dimension of true service. Mahatma Gandhi has said,

Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy.

Advent is not only about waiting; it is about preparation. Of course, we need to prepare for the future, but we don't always realize that the best preparation for the future is to live fully in the present. The best preparation for the future event of our death is to live our life fully. The best way to create the kind of nation, the kind of world in which we would like to live: a world without poverty, hate, terrorism, and injustice, is to live each and every moment as compassionately as we can. When we do this, as is illustrated in the Legend of the Rainmaker, which we heard last week, because of our deep interconnectedness with each other, with all that is, we have a profoundly positive effect upon the world!

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, the ongoing creation and evolution of ourselves. This trust in the process of life can sustain us when we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness. Hope is built on the memory of what we have already experienced, what we have already endured. We need to remember those times when we were afraid, depressed, or lost. Even though we thought we could not survive those 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, goals 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. If we have no hope in something greater than ourselves, it is easy to become swallowed up in fear, the kind of fear that leads to hateful thoughts, feelings, words, and actions.

However, the strength of hope is also its greatest danger--its focus on the future. We hope we will win the lottery, mistakenly believing that once we become rich, we will be happy. We hope that people in our lives, e.g., certain family members, will change as we wish them to change, will behave as we would like them to behave. Then, as they become more lovable, we will be able to love them! However, by living in a fantasy of 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 in our Advent wreath. We long for national and international peace, for a time when nations and groups of people will be able to live together in

harmony—especially Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine. We long for the inner peace that 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. A fruit of this experience of inner peace is a sense 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 dissolve our ego and enter into the great silence, 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 and challenged the religious authorities of his day, just as Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted and challenged the secular and political authorities and the religious institutions of our time. If people of vision back away from conflict, civilization will not evolve, it will devolve; in fact, it may not even survive. As we take a stand against the inequities and injustices of our time and our society, we hope to raise the consciousness of those whose beliefs we oppose. Just as Mahatma Gandhi called forth the conscience of the British to bring colonialism in India to an end, so we, in our own little way, might call forth people into a life that is free of prejudice and hate.

This morning, Rick and Alan lit the candle of joy in our Advent wreath. Just as with the spiritual gifts of hope and peace, joy is one of the answers to the problem of fear. It is impossible to experience true joy, the inbreaking and indwelling sense of joy that accompanies a deep and meaningful life, a life grounded in Christ, and still feel fear, still be overwhelmed by anxiety. Joy, like love casts out fear!

As I mentioned last week, Nancy Gibbs, the Edward R. Murrow visiting professor at Harvard University School of Government, has said,

Hate, among all our instincts, is the most distinctly human. In animals, violence and venom are tools of survival, in humans, of supremacy. Small, scared people hate; self-hating people hate; bullied and betrayed people hate, as though hate will make them large and safe and strong.

Note the absence of joy in the lives of people whose mouths spew hate and whose actions incarnate it. How could you possibly be filled with a deep spiritual joy and hate your brother or sister because of his/her race, ethnicity, gender identity, or religious beliefs? It is impossible! Hate cannot coexist with joy any more than it can with hope, peace, love, and an inner spiritual light.

Webster defines joy as “the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying.” I don’t find this definition helpful in understanding the spiritual dimension of joy, because I think that joy is much 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 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 same experience. But you did! Joy, you see, is intensely personal and subjective.

I believe we experience true joy 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, our self-absorption, and touches us deeply!

C. S. Lewis spoke of being “surprised by joy.” I think we can be surprised by joy in many ways. We can be touched by joy more often than we think. Joy can actually become a daily experience if we are open to it, if we are receptive to God’s presence in our life. Joy can be a central part of our religious experience, our spiritual encounter with the transcendent.

Just think of the great religious leaders of our time—how they not only share a message of joy; they actually live it! I am thinking of a dialogue between two of my spiritual teachers, Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, in their book *The Book of Joy*. I think of Pope Francis, whom I hold in high regard. By the way, today is Pope Francis’s birthday—he is 87. When Francis speaks of his own personal faith, as he does in his book, *The Joy of the Gospel*, the word “joy” appears thirty times in the book’s first four pages.

The ancient Israelites, who were oppressed, 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. Psalm 51 asks God to “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” Isaiah 35 assures the Israelites that,

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing. . . .*

*And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

But what if *we* are the “new Jerusalem” that God is creating? What if you and I are the “new Jerusalem?” What if *we* are meant to bring joy to others and to the earth?

The gospel, the good news that Jesus preached and lived was shot through and through with joy! From the very beginning, the birth of Jesus gives rise to an outpouring of human and heavenly joy. When, as described in Luke 10:17, the seventy followers of Jesus return to Jesus to report on their outreach mission, we read,

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”

When, following his resurrection and his post-resurrection encounters with his disciples, Jesus ascends to heaven, Luke 24:52 tells us,

Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

In these and many other places, an encounter with either the historical Jesus or the risen Christ is accompanied by a feeling of great joy! Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, tells us that one of the “fruits of the Holy Spirit” is joy!

Perhaps this is the key to our experience of joy this Christmas season. Perhaps we should not be looking for what Webster describes as a feeling of happiness or delight. Those feelings may come to us at various times in our lives, usually evoked by some specific circumstance, but they pass just as quickly. They are transient. This can’t be what Isaiah meant by the experience of joy! Isaiah was talking about a new creation, not only a new heaven but also a new earth, a new creation within us, and then a new creation in the world.

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?

Finally, I believe that joy is inextricably linked to sorrow. Webster tells us that the opposite of joy is sorrow. Are they really opposites, or do they contain each other? The joy that Mary experienced at the gift of her child, the birth 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 our capacity for joy. This is what we experience when we grieve the loss of loved ones; the realization that there would be no sorrow if there had not been the experience of joy. As the Lebanese mystic Kahlil Gibran has said,

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is now giving you joy. When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

In a television show I watched recently, a parishioner who has recently lost his wife asks his pastor, whose wife died several years ago, "Do you ever stop thinking of her; do you ever stop feeling the pain?" The pastor replied, "No--but why would you want to?"

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

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

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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OUR RESPONSE TO THE WORD – A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

We commonly think of stewardship as sharing our time, talent, and treasure with our church, of sharing our gifts with others. However, we also need to be good stewards of the gifts that have been given to us. The apostle Paul tells us that joy is one of the gifts, one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. If we experience this gift, just like the gifts of love, peace, patience, fortitude, and charity, and if we are good stewards of this and the other gifts in our own life, it will bear fruit not only in our mission outreach to our brothers and sisters in need, but also in the quality of what we bring to everyone whose life intersects with ours.

In thankfulness for the gifts that God has given us, the gifts of the Spirit, and in our desire to be good stewards of these gifts, we dedicate our morning offering, our mission offering, and the many ways that we share God's love with the world by joining in our unison Prayer of Dedication. Let us pray:

God of great wonders, we join with you in the joy of this season of giving. You gave us a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. You give us life and breath; you fill the world with beauty, our hands with bounty, and our hearts with the desire to give. Accept these gifts and ourselves in service always, in every season. Amen.