

Advent: A Time for Joy
Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2009
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Isaiah 12: 2- 6

²Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for God is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation. ³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

⁴And you will say in that day: Give thanks to God, call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations; proclaim that God's name is exalted. ⁵Sing praises to the God, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Philippians 4: 4 - 7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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This Sunday is Advent is commonly known as “Joyful Sunday” and today’s readings are invitations to the faithful to sing, celebrate and rejoice because of the advent of God. “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” Isaiah predicts when he talks about the certainty of God in his life. Paul exhorts the early Christians in Philippi, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. Jesus Christ is near. Have no anxiety about anything because the peace of God will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus IS the reason for the season! And so we light the pink candle, the symbol of joy, on our Advent wreath.

Yet, in the midst of this call to joy, too often the reality of these Advent Days is far from joyful.

“I’m not sure about this ‘Joyful Sunday’ business,” one worried young mother was overheard to say at this time of year as she tried to juggle newborn baby and 2 siblings while trying to make ends meet. “Seems to me that joy is reserved for the well-organized who have money to do Christmas shopping and have already completed their gift buying. I get Christmas cards that say, ‘Joy,’ and in church we light the third Advent candle, the candle of joy, but I’m not feeling much of it right now. My husband is out of work; we’re strapped with expenses and buried in debt. Everyone in the family is sick with colds. Why I’ve spent more time in the doctor’s office this month than I have at home! Where is the joy of ‘Joyful Sunday?’ she implores.

Or this scenario. It was the day before “Joyful Sunday.” The phone rang. “Pastor, you don’t know me, but I live just down the street from your church. I’m calling from my neighbor’s house because I don’t have a telephone. I’m a single parent. My ‘ex’ hasn’t paid his child support in over a year even though our 13 year old son has to go to the cancer center in Boston every month for radiation treatments for his bone cancer. There’s little food in the house and last year’s winter clothes don’t fit the kids this year. What can you do to help us?”

Ah, where is the joy for this woman and her family in the Advent season?

Or this scenario. It was Christmas Eve and the tree stood majestically in the center of the room. It was a full twelve feet tall. But they had always had tall trees because smaller ones would have been dwarfed in the tall, cathedral ceiling den of the old house. They had moved to the house on baby John’s first birthday. It had been so exciting to move from a tiny apartment to a wonderful home of their very own. There, they had raised a family and watched their children bring home babies of their own. But this year, it was different. Because the one who had been husband, dad and grampa to them all, was gone. And as the ritual of the tree trimming began this Christmas Eve, there was a certain emptiness and loss that filled the spacious den. Yet the tree was trimmed, the cookies eaten, nothing else left to do. An oppressive silence stumbled across the floor. The time they all secretly dreaded had arrived. For each year, when all else had been completed, and just prior to bed, Dad, always Dad, read the Christmas story from Luke. Where was the “joy” from Joyful Sunday when it was most needed?

Or...The rather young man opened his Christmas cards as soon as he arrived home from work. He needed something to keep himself occupied so that he wouldn’t indulge in a drink...or two...or three before dinner. This was always the hardest time of day for him, when the temptation to drink away the days headaches and heartaches was the greatest. And the mail didn’t help him at all. Both cards turned out to be invitations to holiday

parities, where, he knew, the good times would roll. There would be plenty of food and drink, to make everyone merry. How could he go and not drink, for there was such pressure from his friends. Yet, if he did not go at all, who would be his friends? For this young man, this recovering alcoholic who was trying to overcome chemical dependency, the holiday season was far from being filled with joy.

“Joy” you say? Where is the joy that was celebrated on that third Sunday of Advent.

Even old Scrooge reminds us that the Christmas world is full of fools. This tight-fisted, squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching old sinner is frozen with disgruntlement. “Bah, humbug!” is his retort to Fred, his nephew, when Fred wishes him a “Merry Christmas.” “A Merry Christmas? Bah, humbug! What reason have you to be merry?” he inquires of Fred. “Why Christmas for you is but a time for paying bills without money, a time for finding yourself a year older but not an hour richer. Bah! Humbug!”

The “Joy” of Advent, oh, where can it be found?

One thing is for certain: none of the people in this morning’s vignettes will find joy out “there” in their world: nor will they be able to create the joy which they are seeking.

Isn’t it true, that too often, during this season, we think that we can make Joy. In fact, we go out of our way to try to do it. We bake and shop and decorate and buy and wrap and mail and bake and shop and decorate some more.

Isn’t it ironic that in our very attempt to create joy, we fall victim to that which is joy’s absolute opposite – exhaustion, frenzy, impatience, self-indulgence, indigestion and debt!

The problem is that the secular joys – those rooted in our escapist attempts to forget the past and not worry about the future, or those rooted in money and energy expended on that which will make us happy and merry and give us a “quick fix” – these joys are superficial, “seasonal” and not truly satisfying.

Through our readings today, we need to be called back to the biblical understanding of joy. It is a joy that we cannot create, a joy that we cannot make nor achieve. It is simply a gift to us from God. Therein lies the secret. The joy of Advent is not of our doing, it is God’s doing. The joy of Advent is not external, it is internal. The joy of Advent is simply the assurance of God’s presence in our lives through the boundless gift of Jesus Christ.

The gift of joy comes to us from the past. It was given to all of humankind over 2,000 years ago in a manger in Bethlehem.

The gift of joy is ours day, as we recognize Christ's presence in our very midst!

And this gift of joy will be ours forever, especially at death when we embrace eternal life and as we wait for the fullness of the Kingdom of God that God has promised us.

Do you remember how Jesus, after speaking to his disciples about intimacy and love, said to them, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

And so for the married mother, whose family suffered from bad colds and low funds, joy was realized when she and other mothers from their four year olds Play Group decided to provide Christmas for a family less fortunate than they happened to be. And so they made and bought simple gifts and planned a Christmas dinner menu for someone else. And together, all of these young mothers decided that since acts of mercy and justice are what God's kingdom is all about, why not do the things that characterize that for which they were all waiting.

The single parent, whose 13 year old suffered from bone cancer and whose welfare check could not be stretched any further, was the recipient of the Christmas gifts and bountiful dinner prepared by the mothers of the four year olds Play Group. And she was able to know the "joy" that comes on the other end of sharing, for her children had gifts to open and a full course dinner to enjoy. And even though her problems had not been solved, the joy of the season was more than sufficient.

The older widow interrupted the embarrassing silence on Christmas Eve with the words: "I know what you're feeling. Dad always read the Christmas story and he is not here to do the deed this year. But he had some thoughts he wanted to share and, before he died, he asked me if I would read this to you on Christmas Eve. She took out a gray envelope that the children immediately recognized as their fathers stationery. Although her hands trembled slightly, her voice remained strong as she read.

My dearest family: By now, all stands ready for the Great Day. The lights are strung, the tree is decorated, the arguments are settled, the cookies have been consumed and the gifts distributed. I suspect, however, the notes of the angelic chorus may sound a little flat tonight. You may have trouble believing there can be any "good tidings of great joy."

But as I consider all the Christmas Eves and Christmas Days we celebrated together, I am overwhelmed by the message that was delivered to the shepherds so long ago. Those simple herdsmen didn't receive a mere birth announcement. Instead, they witnessed the dawning of a new era, the age of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Christmas in our home has always been a time of great happiness. We remembered that Jesus' birth proclaimed God's never-ending love for us. And Jesus' life showed us the way, the road that we should follow. His death and resurrection taught us how to face our own end with the complete assurance we will live eternally with him.

It occurs to me that it is impossible for us to see the manger and miss the cross. We cannot recall the star without also remembering the empty tomb.

I have written this letter because I feel compelled to leave you something this year. Don't cry on my behalf, but know I am now with the One for whom the angels sing. The only gift I can give you this year may be the greatest gift I have ever given. Dear family, rejoice! Because I would have you know I am spending Christmas with the Christ! All my love, Dad.

As for the young recovering alcoholic, a sense of peace and joy was his only after he turned all of his anxieties and worries over to God in prayer. For him, the anxiety of making decisions, seeking direction and purpose in life, love and work could only be replaced by prayer. He lived the saying, "Let go and let God."

And we all know the ending to Scrooge. His life is transformed by the ghosts of the past, present and future. He promises to honor Christmas in his heart and keep it all the year through. His joy is within as he repents of the deeds from his past and wishes God's blessing on all, even as he begins to live out his new found joy with his nephew Fred, with Bob Cratchet, Martha and Tiny Tim and with his community.

When love becomes real, joy overflows.

May we all discover God's gift of love this Advent and join the angel's chorus singing, "Joy to the world! The Lord has come!!" I wish you all the gift of joy this Christmas.

May it be so. Amen and Amen.

