

GOD IS STILL SPEAKING: JOY

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰And 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.

(Isaiah 35:1-10, NRSV)

“I’ve got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart.” Did you sing that song in Sunday School? We sang it frequently when I was a child at Havenview Baptist Church down in Memphis. It was always great fun, especially when we tried to sing, “I’ve got the peace that passeth understanding down in my heart” at warp speed. Being a glad-hearted child I enjoyed singing songs about happiness and joy, but as I’ve grown older such songs can sometimes seem trite and hollow.

Bobby McPherin is among today’s most talented and innovative jazz vocalists. However, most people only know him for one song, “Don’t Worry Be Happy.” I’ve always had a love/hate relationship with that song. On a day when I’m driving the kids to the beach the song seems perfect. On a day when I’m driving away from a hospital having visited someone in declining health the song seems cruel. The message of the song never changes, but life is full of ups and downs, which make the song sometimes appropriate and at other times terribly inappropriate.

Such is the case with happiness. If we’re having a day when we’re feeling a little blue an external change will often lift our spirits—a phone call from a friend, a chapter from a good book, curling up with the cat, or taking a walk. We can literally do things that make us happy. Marcus Borg writes, “Happiness covers a broad spectrum, from a fairly steady state of general contentment with one’s life to special moments of delight and feeling good” (*The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 5 # 4, p. 4). The root of the word happy is *hap*, meaning chance, as in happenstance or haphazard (www.christchurchsummit.org/Sermons-1998/981213-TrueJoy.html). Happiness ebbs and flows, usually dependent on external circumstance.

Joy, on the other hand, is markedly different. Children’s author and lay-theologian, C. S. Lewis, said that, “Pleasure ...is often in our power, joy never is” (Ibid.).

Where we can make ourselves happy by enjoying dinner with friends, joy does not come so easily. To a large degree we can control happiness, whereas joy remains beyond our control. Joy is deeper, more profound, and more rare than happiness. We can pursue happiness. With any luck we can find happiness, but not joy. We may seek joy, we may set the stage, create the right environment for joy, but joy is unpredictable. We don't find joy. Joy finds us.

Theologian, Doris Donnelly, summarizes C. S. Lewis' view of joy stating that, "...joy surprises. It comes unbidden and unplanned for. It cannot be commandeered, coerced or even gently cajoled into existence" (Ibid. p. 6). Underscoring this deep belief, Lewis entitled his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*. Lewis had been a hardcore agnostic before experiencing unexpected joy one day while riding a bus (of all things).

Marcus Borg observes that, "In English, 'joy' and 'jewel' are etymologically related. Like a jewel, joy is of great value and beauty, and greatly prized. But unlike a jewel, it can neither be purchased nor possessed. It is a gift. [We] cannot make it happen and [we] cannot own it. As [the Apostle Paul] says, it is one of the primary gifts of the Spirit. It comes from God" (Ibid. p. 5).

Another important aspect of joy is that it can exist despite our external condition. Doris Donnelly reflects that, "Joy coexists with pain...Joy is not jollity. It does not guarantee that we will be the life of the party. It is much more like an anchor that gives us the stability we need to endure all kinds of upsets and struggles and delights with an equanimity and inner peace no storm can shake. Because joy has its source beyond our earthly calculations, it is [a gift from God] and always will be indestructible" (Ibid. p. 6).

One of the best illustrations of joy in the midst of troubling times can be found in today's scripture lesson from the prophet Isaiah. He prophesied in Judah, the Southern Kingdom, between 742 and 701 BC. He knew of the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians, who deported many Israelites. One of the reasons the Northern Kingdom fell was because it failed to rely on God for support but instead relied on its own military might and that of other countries. "Isaiah prophesied that Jerusalem was safe because the Lord dwelt there in the temple. This was affirmed when the Assyrians [besieged] Jerusalem and the people...[became] desperate when suddenly the Assyrians departed...leaving Jerusalem safe for another 114 years" (http://oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au/YrAAdXtEp0405/Adv3Isa35_2004.htm).

Nevertheless, Judah was not off the hook. Isaiah prophesied that in time it too would fall, in this case to the Babylonians. However, even then all hope was not lost because one day, one glorious, miraculous day, the people would once again return to their homeland. The prophecy of that joyous day is the setting for today's scripture lesson.

Australian Old Testament professor, Howard Wallace, nicely paraphrases the first ten verses of Isaiah 35. "Isaiah 35...describes the intervention of God...as restorer and deliverer. Verses 1-2 tell of the restoration of the land through which the exiles will return to Zion [another name for Jerusalem]...The land itself bursts into joy, as its fertility and beauty are restored. The joy is expressed in the blooming of tree and flower where there had been dry and lifeless desert...The wilderness itself sings and rejoices as its fruitfulness returns. This is God's doing. God is preparing the appropriate 'Holy Way' along which the faithful people will return. But in verse 3 the mood changes. Before they can make the return journey, the prophet must convince the fearful and weakened remnant of Judah that God will lead

them back to Zion. There is reassurance that God ‘will come and save you’ (v. 4). After this time, the people will celebrate. Verses 5-6a detail the classic signs of restoration. The most vulnerable and weak among the exiles will have the greatest reason for celebration. The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will be made strong, and [those unable to talk] will sing for joy. They will also witness the rebirth of the parched and exhausted land...No one who sets out on the road will be lost, and the travelers will be protected from danger. ‘No lion shall be there’ or any other hungry wild beast (v. 9a). God has redeemed the righteous exiles from their misery and captivity, and they will return to Zion, singing songs of joy”

(<http://vic.uca.org.au/~hwallace/WebOTcomments/AdventA/Advent3Isa35>).

Isaiah looks to the future and despite knowing that tragedy and difficulty lays ahead, he prophesies joy. Joy is a central theme in Advent, not because everything is peachy and perfect in the present, but because we can look into the future at the light breaking on God’s distant horizon and see hope. And feel joy. When the angel startled the shepherds on that starry night long ago he announced “good news of a *great joy* that shall be for all people” (Luke 2:10). The Magi who followed the star were, according to Matthew 2:10, “overwhelmed with joy” when they saw that the star had stopped and they were almost face to face with little Jesus.

Not only are there words of joy associated with the birth of Jesus, but also in the midst of Holy Week’s atrocities. The night before he died Jesus spoke to the disciples in the Upper Room saying, “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn...you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain...But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of [having the newborn baby]. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your

hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:20-22).

Isaiah saw the storm clouds gathering and knew that his people were in trouble, that they would be conquered and enslaved by the Babylonians. And yet he looked beyond these events to a time when God would save the people and lead them home. Isaiah said, “The ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (35:10). Jesus spoke with his followers only a few hours before the Romans hauled him off for torture and execution. And yet he said, “You have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22).

The joy of Advent comes from looking back at what God did in the past and from looking forward to what God will do in the future. We look back to the innocence of the manger, the tragedy of the cross, and the miracle of the empty tomb. And we look forward to a time of peace without end, a time of tears being wiped away forever, and a time of joy, endless joy in the very presence of God. God is still speaking: joy. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)
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PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we gather today in this Advent season. We desire to live our lives in your presence, but sometimes our busyness keeps us from hearing your voice and experiencing your joy. We are getting ready for Christmas, but sometimes we neglect to prepare our hearts to receive the Christ of Christmas. Help us lay aside the frenzied whirlwind of activity, to once again hear your still, small voice. Help us once again experience the simple, yet profound joy of this holy season.

Thank you, O God, for this Advent season. We believe that you are still speaking and ask that you speak to our hearts even today. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

(Portions of this prayer were adapted from *Invocations and Benedictions* by John M. Drescher, p. 104.)