

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
for Sunday, December 14, 2014
“Where is Your Joy?”

Texts: **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126**
and **Luke 1:46-55: (sung)-My Soul is Filled with Joy (Haas*)**

Is your glass half full or half empty?

Is the world going to hell in a handbasket or on its way to the fulfillment of God’s purpose?

Does everything you try get messed up somehow or does everything work out some way?

In this Advent season, we’ve been asking questions each week as we ponder our place in the universe and how our responses and reactions to what occurs in our lives during this season of waiting can help shape what is to come – whether it be for the better or not-so-much...

Being present to our own inner monologues and how we respond to the various stimuli that comes our way throughout each day, says a lot about how we show up in this life not only to ourselves and to others but also to God.

A couple of weeks ago, we looked at the ways in which we wait, hope and expect can make a difference to that for which we hope. Last week, we explored the means by which we find comfort and offer comfort to others. And now in this time together, as we bask in the light of the Gaudete candle, we wonder together about what it is that brings us joy and how the joy we feel and express can be an inspiration to others and bring more and more light into the world.

This Sunday takes its common name from the Latin word Gaudete, which is the first word of the introit of this day’s Mass as celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church among others, namely, “Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete.” Anybody? Yes, that’s: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice” as found in Philippians 4.

So today is a day about rejoicing. It’s about finding the joy in every situation of our lives, even or especially while being true to ourselves, to what is really going on in the world around us and to our God.

In studying up on the meaning of Gaudete Sunday for this Sunday of Joy, I discovered that the season of Advent originated as a fast of forty days in preparation for Christmas, much like the 40 days of fasting during the Lenten season. During this time, Gaudete Sunday served as a kind of counterpart to Laetare Sunday, which provides a break about midway through the season of penitence and signifies the nearness of the Christ’s coming. This was a time where the “penitential exercises suitable to that spirit are...suspended...for a while in order to symbolize that joy and gladness in the promised Redemption.” The rose-pink color of this Gaudete candle then is obtained by the mixing of the penitential purple of Lent and the redemptive white of Easter and the promise fulfilled.

And here’s something I found truly fascinating: this Laetare Sunday is also known as “Refreshment Sunday” or “Mothering Sunday.” And what better kind of tie-in is there for us than THAT to bring us back to this Sunday of Joy and our text for today where the Blessed Mother sings her magnificent magnificat, expressing the truest joy of all time in being chosen to give birth to the very Son of God.

At our Advent LEAP of Faith time together this week at Vivi’s house where we studied, prayed and enjoyed a very joyous vegetarian version of Shepherd’s Pie, I asked those gathered to express what

JOY means to them. What first issued forth was the joy found in family, in children and in grandchildren. Oh, I think somebody said joy is found in childbirth, but quickly corrected that to say joy in children once they've been born!

As a childless person myself (other than those whom I have somehow inadvertently adopted, albeit in a spiritual sense), I can only approach this kind of joy by being on the other end of it. Being fortunate enough to grow up in a household where I felt well and truly loved, there was no greater joy than my mother's embrace or my father's hearty, "well done, son." Even now those signs of affection and gifts of acceptance bring a smile to my face and fills my heart with abiding joy.

But what if we feel we haven't experienced that kind of human love and acceptance in our lives? Is there a way to access the joy felt in this kind of parental tenderness even if we have not been the recipients of it in a visceral sense?

For the answer to that, we turn back to Isaiah and the extraordinary reversals inherent in the text. The hope that awaits those who have lost it is primary here as we remember that, "The audience appears to be exiles who have recently returned to Jerusalem," the Rev. Scott Hoezee writes in his reflections on chapter 61. "The promise of newness comes to them as they look around their beloved city and see troubled relationships and power struggles with those who did not leave but continued to make their lives in Jerusalem. They see no signs of a rebuilt temple. This promise of freedom, comfort, restoration, and praise likely seemed far off -- yet it was spoken. God was at work in their midst. God was at work through them."

Whether or not we have experienced the abiding love and acceptance of those here on earth, we know that we are loved and accepted by the One who is the source of all love. Spending time in God's embrace we can find the peace and the joy that may seem to elude us on this earthly plane.

This is not to denigrate or deny the reality of abuse or neglect in our lives, but it is a way to see all of what occurs for us as happening within the reality of God and placing our hope in the eternal joy that is ours to claim through the promise of Christ.

"This is a season of contrasts," the Rev. Melissa Bane Sevier writes in her article, "Joy": "[contrasts] in the weather; in the hectic busyness versus the desire to "cocoon" at home; [and] in people's emotional states. December is "supposed" to be a time of happiness in all the frenetic activity; and that cultural expectation merely highlights the fact that, for many, this is not an easy time. Some are still suffering from the economic downturn even as others have found jobs. Those who are unsteady on their feet worry about slippery sidewalks while children pray for snow [or rain] days. Not every family dynamic is what we'd like it to be. Grief and loss and winter depression are mocked by happy carols piped into shopping malls."

Where in your life do you find your thoughts and feelings contrasting with what you feel others are experiencing around you? Do you find yourself longing for a deep and lasting joy that seems to escape your grasp?

"Isaiah points to precisely what so many people pine for every single day of their lives," Dr. Hoezee states: "the great reversal. The poor whose lives have for so long been filled with nothing but bad news get the gift of good news. Those long held captive in dungeons and prisons of all kinds get promised their freedom. Those who for years have spent so many days dampening handkerchiefs with their tears get comforted and pointed toward a day of smiles and laughter. Ashes get blown away to make way for glittering crowns. The drab duds of mourning get replaced with festive and

colorful garments fit for a really great party. People who for too long have felt like dead sticks are promised that they will soon stand as tall and sturdy as the grandest oak tree.”

What greater example of this kind of reversal is there than our central character for today, Mary? “For You have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed,” she proclaims near the beginning of her song. In this moment, as she greets Elizabeth, her beloved cousin, with another promise budding within her own womb, Mary realizes that SHE, a person of little means and certainly no earthly power, wealth or true security as a young woman in ancient Nazareth, is being favored by God to bring about the greatest source of joy to humanity for all time.

“Mary’s enthusiastic song in response to Jesus’ impending birth invites us to consider the question that we are invited to ponder throughout this Advent season,” Carl Gregg asserts on his Patheos blog. That is, “What Christianity would look like [if] the focus were as much or more about birth instead of death, human flourishing instead of suffering, and this world instead of the next?”

Which brings us to one of the most important aspects of experiencing the kind of deep joy in your life or mine that we so hunger after. And that is being PRESENT to the presence of God in the present moment. Is that enough “presents” for you?

“If you watch your mind, you will see you live most of your life in the past or in the future, both of which Jesus warns us against,” Father Richard Rohr wrote in his essay, “Be Here Now” this week. “That’s just the way the mind works. If you are to experience the ever-present and ever-coming Christ, the one place you have to be is the one place you are usually not: NOW HERE or “nowhere.” Everything that happens to you happens right now; if you can’t be present right now, nothing new is ever going to happen to you. You will not experience your experiences; they will not go to any depth in your soul. You really won’t grow unless you’re willing to live right here, right now—to be present.”

And the only way to be truly present as Father Rohr sees it is to practice Jesus’s instruction to “love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, with your whole mind, and with your whole strength...Whenever all of these parts are working together at the same time,” he states, “you are present.

“If we will trouble to listen, to bend an ear to this Sunday’s readings,” Kathleen Norris writes in her article for the Christian Century entitled “Standing on Promises,” “we hear from a prophet [and] a psalmist that no matter what befalls us, God is faithful, and God’s promises are true. The psalmist insists that God will see to it that we who are lost will find our way home, and we who sow in tears will reap with joy. The prophet offers a beatitude, promising the consolation of gladness to those who mourn. Both authors presume our intimate knowledge of pain and loss, but they assert that far better things await us, joys we can scarcely imagine.”

And so we wait. We hope, we comfort and we look for joy. In the very presence of God, being present to Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, we draw closer to the fulfillment of God’s promise: the Wonderful, the Counselor, the Prince of Peace.

(Concluding benediction take from a Candle-lighting for the third Sunday in Advent — the words are Richard Bott, United Church of Canada pastor from British Columbia, Canada)

It's a story, quite a story, that began long ago, when the prophets foretold a messiah.
Line of David, it was stated would bring forth a new son,
 who would change the world - turn up-side down!
Then there's Mary (not yet married) gave her, "Yes," to the plan
with her love, she became co-creator.
Child of Wisdom, Child of Promise, here comes Emmanuel!
And with that joy, she sang out her song –

Angel's words, angel's wings -new life is growing, my heart sings:
"Peace on earth, enough for all!
Soon we'll be living God's way."

For the mothers who are ready
to tear tyrants from their thrones,
so that their children may live and love;
for the fathers that stand beside them,
to offer strength and support -
Alleluia, God!

 May the joy that we feel in your Presence,
 fill us with life abundant,
 so that, when the time is right,
 that joy can be birthed, new,
 into your Creation.

Alleluia.

Alleluia!

ALLELUIA!

Amen!