

The Joy in Advent

“Those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.” Psalm 126:6-7

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A few weeks ago, I shared with you the fact that my first experience in ordained ministry was as a chaplain to elementary school children. This morning I want to offer another story from those days.

One of my first mentors at the school was its music teacher. I'll call her Katie. Because music and religion were taught back-to-back, sometimes in the same multi-purpose classroom, I often would arrive early, and watch Katie teach music to the children.

I remember observing her one day teach a simple song to a group of kindergartners. After carefully reviewing with the class the melody and the lyrics, Katie asked if anyone would now like to volunteer to demonstrate how to sing the song. No sooner had she asked than nearly every hand in the class shot up, and you could see a room filled with squirming, wiggly 5-year-olds all eager to show the world what he or she could now do.

Afterwards, I praised Katie for her teaching skill and easy manner with the children and told her how impressed I was with the enthusiasm she generated within the class. “That is kindergarten for you,” Katie said. “But just wait until I get the fourth graders in here; then, I'll be lucky to get half a dozen volunteers. And by the time the eighth graders arrive,” she said, “all I'll see are blank stares and eye rolls as if I were from another planet.”

“The truth is,” Katie explained, “when kids are 4 or 5, they are filled with curiosity and wonder, utterly un-self-conscious and without guile, and when you introduce them to a new experience, they take genuine delight in it. Yes, you have to be patient with kindergartners, but what they lack in discipline, they more than make up for in sheer joy.”

“But then,” she said with a sigh, “somehow the world manages to slowly squeeze the joy out of them somewhere between fourth and sixth grades, and by middle school, the joy of singing for most of them has been completely squelched.”

I'm not sure what accounts for this loss of joy as we age – if it is the natural and inevitable arc of growing self-consciousness as we mature; or if culturally we discourage children as they get older from taking the risks of exploring their imaginative and creative sides that allow for joy; or if our hyper-competitive culture is so judgmental that we become afraid of failure, worried we won't be liked if we're not as good as our neighbor; or if it is a hangover of our Puritan heritage of keeping our noses a little too close to the grindstone. But, whatever the reason, I can attest, as someone who has served as chaplain to every grade from nursery school through grad school at Harvard University, that there is far, far more joy in a classroom of five-year-olds than there is in Harvard Yard.

I tell this story because today – the third Sunday in Advent – is all about “joy.” Sometimes called *Gaudete Sunday*, which is the Latin for “rejoice,” this Sunday is intentionally designed to be a bit of a break from the penitential tone of the rest of Advent. That is why our candle on the Advent wreath today is rose-colored: to remind us of this joy. The dark, apocalyptic readings of the first two Sundays of Advent are behind us, and the focus in our lessons today is on the joy we anticipate in God's arrival in our lives.

We hear in our first lesson from Isaiah how the prophet “greatly rejoices” in anticipation of God's renewal of the earth, and how Isaiah's “whole being shall exult” (Isa. 61:10) with joy because of a God who loves justice and binds up the brokenhearted. Our Psalmist too remembers how God restored Zion and brought the people home after exile, provoking “shouts of joy,” assuring the people that even those who may now “sow with tears” will eventually “reap with songs of joy” (v. 6).

Our New Testament lessons, if anything, amp up the joy even more. In our epistle lesson, Paul urges the Thessalonians to “rejoice always,” “giving thanks in all circumstances,” and “holding fast to what is good.” (1 Thess. 5:16). And while you may not think that cranky, old John the Baptist, forever crying out in the wilderness about Jesus, is exactly a poster child for “joy,” think again. While our gospel lesson today isn't explicit about it, I invite you to harken back to the scene in Luke when John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth, meets her cousin, Mary, and they share the news of their respective pregnancies, a story that we call the Visitation. What does Luke tell us happens while John is waiting in his mother's womb? Elizabeth says to Mary: “as soon as I heard your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” (Luke 1:44).

And then finally, and perhaps most importantly, Jesus, the Messiah, to whom all of today's lessons ultimately point, is the same Jesus, who much later in John's

Gospel, near the end of his earthly life, prays to his Father in Heaven that his deepest desire is that Jesus' joy may be in us, so that our joy may be complete. (John 15:11).

If you think I am belaboring all these Scriptural texts about joy, you are right, because my aim here is to convince you this morning of one basic truth: The meaning of life is joy. God created us to be joyful. Joy is our destiny. And while the world may try its best to beat the joy out of us – and God knows the Coronavirus is doing its level best to do just that – God promises us in today's lessons that He will indeed restore our joy.

So, what is this thing called joy? Joy has aspects of pleasure, yet it is so much more than fleeting flashes of pleased senses. It is akin to happiness too, yet it is more than a mere temporary state of satisfaction. Joy is perhaps closer to delight, yet joy runs a bit deeper than that.

Joy frees us from all those things that bind us: the need to be practical, to follow established rules, to please others, to make good use of time. Joy has no “purpose,” it is its own reward, its own reason for being. Joy is filled with wonder, surprise, expectation, insight, beauty, and power.

The Anglican theologian Rowan Williams puts it this way: “joy is about discovering that the world is so much more than you ever suspected, and that you yourself are so much more than you suspected. Joy. . .breaks open the shell of the world we thought we knew and projects us into a new and mysterious realm in which boundless mercy, inexhaustible love, and dazzling beauty make all the rules.” Easter Sermon 2011.

Ultimately, however, all of these attempted definitions end up falling somewhat short. Joy has to be experienced to be really known.

I'm mindful, of course, that in the midst of this pandemic joy may seem very remote to you. Our lives have been grievously disrupted, we are isolated and disconnected from each other, many are suffering, and most of us are prevented from doing the things that normally do bring us joy. How on earth can we experience joy when everything right now seems so bleak?

Well, for starters, let us remember that biblical “joy” is not the simplistic joy of a Hallmark greeting card, but rather the deep joy that is in fact borne of struggle and pain, that has known exile, that has lived through the wilderness, that even knows the horror of the cross. And as both Mary and Elizabeth remind us, biblical joy is the joy

of a mother sweating and crying through a difficult labor only to be greeted in the end with the indescribable elation of knowing a new and beautiful life.

Again, listen to the last verses of our Psalm (126) today:

⁶Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.

⁷Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, *
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

The Bible knows well the darkness that comes before joy, but it also reassures us that joy will always in the end break through the darkness.

So, even if joy is hard for you to feel right now, my invitation on this *Gaudete Sunday* is for you to think back and remember those moments when you truly and deeply felt joy; when time stopped in its tracks, and you were taken out of your head, and put in touch with something much bigger and better and brighter than either the darkness of the world or the smallness of self.

Maybe it was building sandcastles at the shore with a sibling; or baking pies with grandma; or skiing down the mountainside on fresh powder; or sitting with dad in the bleachers at Fenway; or listening to Bach; or maybe it was when you first met your beloved; or sat effortlessly next to him, in silence, by the fire on some cold, wintry night, just soaking up each other's presence.

But whatever your joy is or was, try to name it and reclaim it and, if you can, relive it. Even within the confines of our present isolation, try to be guided by what brings you joy, not what drags you down. And hold fast to this joy, for that is where God means you to be.

And if you are still having trouble re-living joy for whatever reason – if that special person is gone or if the burdens of life just seem too heavy right now – you can still live in the holy memory of that joy. And more than that: you can count on the blessed assurance we hear in Scripture today that Christ will bring you, and me, and all of us, into the presence of that joy again. For joy will have the last word. Joy.