

Sermon Matthew 11:2-10 James 5:7-10 Isaiah 35:1-10 December 16, 2007

What is Your Greatest Joy in the Season? Joy to, not in or of or for the World.

The Candles and Promises of Advent....

Advent Hope. I can somehow almost always find hope, find something to hope for.

On a bad day I can hope for a better day, even plan for it.

Advent Peace. When the noise and clamor of the moment is too much, I can run away from it for awhile, or try my not quite as good as Bose ear phones - is that a Christmas list hint or what?

But Advent Joy. Advent Joy? Whipping up some joy when I need it just doesn't seem to be in my life's recipe book. Joy - those special moments most pleasant - of surprise, of unexpected delight, Joy seems dependent on circumstances... joy is like a gift... not a gain...

Joy - my desire for it, my delight in it, my need of it - all seems to underscore my dependence upon some one, or something else to bring joy into my life.

We have the power to bring a touch of joy to others, but doesn't joy become a part of our lives more as a gift than as something we gain ...?

Doesn't joy, Christmas joy, bring us closer to the heart of Christmas - to the wonder and truth of the gift to us of God with us? Is there any higher joy than this? What is your highest joy in this season. Let us pray.

Lord, in this hour, by the power of your holy spirit, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of these your faithful people, be acceptable in your sight, and your good word to us this day in Christ. Amen.

I suppose in light of the announcement about drugs and baseball this week I can use baseball's imagery to describe my struggle with the focus this third week of Advent on Joy. There was no joy in Mudville, for the Mighty Casey had struck out.

This week my sense of Christmas joy took three strikes and more.... Beyond the sadness of the Baseball scandal - the Free Press has detailed the tragic neglect and abuse of a child named Ricky - And the media have detailed for us the gruesome story of the unbelievable madness of the Lacy crime.

And I have prayed with five families this week watching loved ones die - or at the graves of loved ones lost to them from this world... And joy has not been the feeling coming easiest to my mind or heart.... Joy to the world - in Jesus Christ - in Bethlehem - okay - but where else? Where in our daily lives - a lasting joy.

Where in this war weary, economically worn down, climate warming worried world....

Where in the world, or of the world, or for the world - is there joy that lasts.. that gives us reason to rejoice?

Maybe - maybe - that's what drives us into such a commercialized thing focused

Christmas shopping frenzy every year - There is so little real deep joy that we can find or count on - we get frantic about finding whatever passing and fleeting joys, or are they just delights, we can.

In all the struggles of life, lasting joy seems squeezed out - and we seem to be tempted to beg, borrow, steal, or buy - whatever kind of joy we can.

But - we know - we know - the things we buy will never bring the kind of joy we need and desire most. True joy is something deeper by far...

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

To a deeply depressed and distressed people, exiles in a foreign land for 40 years, Isaiah promises joy.. but a joy grounded not in their own doing - but in God's doing and God's presence with them. And - yes - their openness to god.

To a troubled saddened people Isaiah said - be ready - there maybe weeping now, but in the morning there will be joy

And - you remember - it is this same prophet who said - Out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the lord.

And it was this same prophet who said - The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. A child has been born to us, a son given to us...

And this prophet cried out - a shoot from come out of the stump of Jesse, the spirit of the lord shall rest upon him. Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all the people shall see it Together. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd...

Isaiah had a clear understanding of the wonder of life - It is a gift. And the very best things in life are free gifts from God. You can't make them, or buy them... even and especially the gift of Joy. But by faith we can receive what God, in God's goodness, offers to us. Even the presence of God and all God's promises

Hope and Peace. Those first two gifts of Advent - I can understand them, I think I've got the sense. God's gift of hope in Christ - it connects with my own need to hope. - to look forward to a better tomorrow than today. Hope - yes.

Because God gives me ever new days to hope.

And God's promise of peace, yes that, too. Peace that I can work for, and pray for and even wait for. Because I can know peace now -in quiet moments, or out under the wonder of a starry sky, or in prayer. Peace comes.
And it is something I can work for - called in Christ to be a peace maker.

I can lean forward - stand on tip toe - in hope...
I can work for peace... My needs and God's gifts connect....
But joy... Joy is harder for me to understand. It's hard for me to see how joy works.

I know the kind of unexpected almost giddy excitement of joy - a - how did this happen to me - isn't it wonderful feeling... hope is kind of my doing, and peace is kind of my responsibility to help it happen

But joy - isn't joy almost wholly a gift? Even the word rejoice seems to mean to return joy, to give back some of what we've been given. Rejoice in the lord. Can we make ourselves joyful? Can we? Or is it a gift, a kind of miracle that under the right circumstances just happens. And even when it happens = joy is so elusive. A passing feeling. It comes to us - happens in us - and then the moment passes - circumstances change – and that feeling of joy is gone.

Hope we can hang onto - in the darkest moment we can remember light - and hope for it to come again. Peace we can remember and we can work for it again - work to make it happen.

But Joy comes to us by a power that is its own... that surprises us before it delights us.

The sudden sun in the midst of the rain that brings the rain bow...

The second favorite earring, long lost, and found in a different dresser drawer...

The blossoms on the cheery tree in those brief spring days

The clean untrampled untouched new snow - that covers all with beauty.

Or the terror and momentary magic of sun glistening on a world iced over by a storm.

I can hope for such things to happen again - I can turn off the noise of the world and find moments of peace. But Joy - joy isn't a job I can do... But God can, and God has, and God does. And when it happens - when joy comes to us... then we need to respond.
To rejoice .. to treasure the gift that delights us - and praise the giver of the gift.

It's what Isaiah described for the Hebrew people... beaten down in defeat and exile, separated from their home land by a vast impassable desert... Isaiah described the joy that would be theirs by God's grace and deliverance from exile..

This is the joy that John the Baptist longed for to come into the world, to lift people's spirits, to give them a touch of the wonder that comes from being in the presence of God....

And this is the joy that Jesus brought into the lives of the people of his day...

The healing and helping and caring and curing, the forgiving and new life giving

And it's the joy that James described for his people, the early Christians, still persecuted - but called to be patient and to wait upon the Lord to meet all their needs.

As a farmer waits for the rain to water his crops - so we wait in the dry and hard times in our lives, we wait for the joy of our salvation that is already won for us - and will come to us.

And Christmas..... Christmas joy - the end of a troubled and troubling pregnancy. A joy of expectation that was not Mary's doing - but God's gift. And the joy at the miracle of birth. Christmas - the joy of a new beginning for this world - a new way of living and understanding what our living is all about. About growing into the joy of our salvation.

Of our highest hopes secured. Promised peace produced. Yes - Joy to the World
The Lord is come.... Let earth receive her king.

Not joy in the world - the joy we produce passes as quickly as it comes.

No toy or present under the tree will satisfy our deepest hunger and need...

Joy to the world. Let every heart prepare him room. Joy - not in things or even in pleasing moments of human delight.

But joy in the wonder of God with us - the God who heals all our diseases and redeems our lives from the grave... And so - yes - even for me this week - working my way into and through this sermon - I have begun to see up a bit - again - beyond the sadness at so many deaths, too many graves -

To see Christmas. God with us. Jesus the Risen Lord - the joy, the God given, joy of my salvation... And so - even in this season - the Easter Promise - Worldly joy often wiped out by the worries and wickedness that still walks tall - the sin that nailed and nails Jesus to a cross... persists. But this Jesus is the Christ - he is the babe of Bethlehem - the man of Galilee - and He is God's gift to me of a risen Lord and savior...

So - yes. Yes.... Joy to the world - The Lord is come - Jesus, the Joy of every heart ... Let every heart prepare him room .. I know I need for mine, to make room Don't you....

My highest joy in this season...? To know in some new way the wonder of God's love for me - to rejoice that God is mine... and I am God's forever. Joy to the world... The Lord is come... This is the day, this is the season, that the Lord has made.... Rejoice and be glad in it.... Amen.

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