

Have you ever heard this song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”? Have you heard this song when you were going through a tough time? If you have ever experienced real pain or endured real hardship, you know that “Don’t worry, be happy” just doesn’t cut it. Clever clichés about happiness don’t really help when we hurt. You can’t be happy in the midst of pain because happiness is an outward emotion based on momentary pleasure.

You can be perfectly happy one moment, then your spouse says something to you and you are not happy any more. Even on Christmas morning, you can be incredibly happy with one gift and extremely disappointed with another one. Husbands, when you decide to buy your wife the new snow tires instead of the diamond earrings, let me know how fast she loses her happiness!

On the other hand, it is possible to maintain joy in the midst of pain. Joy is an inward and continual state of contentment regardless of outward circumstances. Joy is far more valuable than happiness. I think this is the reason why the word “happy” is only used 33 times in the Bible whereas the word “joy” is used 485 times emphasizing lasting joy over short-lived happiness.

On the third Sunday of Advent, the penitential purple of the season changes to rose and we celebrate “Gaudete” or “Rejoice!” Sunday. “Rejoice and exult with all your heart” says Zephaniah. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” says St. Paul. Now that sounds like what this season of Advent is supposed to be about—good cheer and holiday exuberance. But, when we get to the gospel for this week, John the Baptist says, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” This does not seem to fit to the theme.

According to the gospel Luke, great crowds streamed into the desert to get yelled at by John. Why? Why were they willing to hear his fire-and-brimstone preaching? What attracted them? The first clue lies in the question they asked John at the conclusion of his sermon. “What should we do?” That’s not a question people ask when things are going well. It’s the question we ask when we’ve come to the ends of ourselves. It’s what we ask when we’re weary, bored, disillusioned, or desperate. “What should we do?”

John's answer provides our second clue. Go home to your families, your neighbors, your vocations, your colleagues and live justly. Stop fleeing. Stop insisting that God is somewhere else, somewhere far away from you. Inhabit the stuff of your lives as deeply and as generously as you can; your Messiah is closer than you think. Inhabit your life, no matter how plain, how obscure, how unglamorous because the holy ground that matters most is the ground beneath your feet.

What John was daring to suggest to his listeners is that holiness is not the mysterious thing we tend to make it. If we're willing to look closely, if we're willing to believe that nothing in our lives is too mundane or secular for God, then we'll understand that all the possibilities for joy we need are embedded in the lives God has already given us because God is Emmanuel God who is with us always. There is no "outside." We don't have to look "out there somewhere." The kingdom of heaven is here, within and among us.

And once again we are reminded that the God who is coming is not Santa Claus "who knows whether you are naughty or nice" but Jesus, God with us, the one who demands that we "turn around" and "follow" him. That's the trouble with listening to the Bible. Instead of finding "joy" through a "positive" psychological assessment of ourselves or the mindless advice to "Don't Worry, Be Happy" no matter what is happening, we are told that "joy" is what happens when we respond to that which God demands of us; and what God demands, in the words of John the Baptist, is "repentance" or a change of heart.

What the gospel is trying to do for us today is release us from the counterfeit "joy" of popping another happy pill. Real "joy" is what happens when we "confront" our difficult life, "face up" to what keeps us unhappy, and "turn toward" God's redeeming love.

The Good News of advent is that God is coming to us, not to destroy us but to refine us, to help us to become what we were meant to be. It is God's great gift to us: to own up to what we have been and done, express our sorrow and be relieved of the terrible burden of having to think that we are "right" all of the time.

As a closing, I would like to share a story about the people of Gubbio. In a nutshell, the people of Gubbio have a problem. The bloody remains of some of their townsfolk start showing up on the streets of their beautiful city when people awake in the morning. Since the people of Gubbio are very proud people, they are convinced that "a stranger" passing through must be responsible for the terrible

crime. Nevertheless, they begin to “lock” their doors at night. When more deaths follow, the same denial “that anyone in Gubbio could be responsible for such a thing” is expressed over and over again.

And then, someone sees a wolf wandering the streets of Gubbio one night after everyone has retired; and the people of Gubbio realize that there is a wolf living in the dark woods on one side of Gubbio. Of course, this could not be their wolf; because they never asked this wolf to come to Gubbio. Immediately, they begin to find ways to dispatch this wolf.

After a number of futile attempts, the people get desperate enough to approach the holy man, St. Francis, who has a reputation for being able “to talk to animals.” He “speaks” to the wolf and gives the people what appears to be some strange and welcome advice. He tells the people of Gubbio that they must “feed” their wolf. At first, the people are not impressed with this suggestion and begin to wonder why they ever approached the holy man in the first place. And then, something happens. Little by little, people begin to leave food out for the wolf as he prowls the streets of Gubbio. The violent deaths cease and it is not long before every man, woman and child has learned how to “feed their wolf.” As a result, the people of Gubbio are transformed. They are joyful, and become more easy-going, less arrogant human beings.

May the story of Gubbio speak to our hearts to find healing, freedom, and joy in a world of violence with hate and fear! Amen.