

PREPARING THE WAY

3) "Genuine Joy!"

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 / Luke 1: 46b-55

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Our Advent pilgrimage continues this morning as we move into our third week of this four week journey. Thus far, we have spent much of our time reflecting upon some rather somber images of the cosmic upheaval that will give way to the coming Day of the Lord and the initiation of the reign of God. Our Advent texts have called upon us to watch and to wait and to prepare the way for the One who comes. Perhaps you've noticed, but these texts have not been what we might term, "happy" or "feel good texts." There is little that is warm or fuzzy about them.

The somber nature of these advent texts is likewise, reflected in the music that ushers in the season. Advent music is not exactly what we would call "happy music," but music in a minor key. It is music that is often a bit moody, reflective and somber.

But, this morning, the mood of Advent begins to shift from the "gloom and doom" texts to those that offer a sense of hope and joy. Our music, likewise, becomes a bit more lively, energetic and hopeful. It is not by accident that our tradition is to light the candle of joy on this the third Sunday of Advent. Our watching and our waiting gives way to the expression of joy—at least in theory.

I say, "in theory," because I've come to learn that the experience of joy—genuine, unadulterated joy—is by no means a given in this or any other season of the year. To be sure, there is much that masquerades as joy—much that gives the impression of joy—but in reality, it often proves to be a false impression.

Perhaps you've seen the current car commercial in which a young child sees a new car sitting in the driveway and immediately breaks out into his happy dance—leaping into the air and doing back flips and cartwheels in gleeful celebration. As the commercial unfolds, that child morphs into an adult who is merely giving joyful expression to his "inner child." As viewers, we are the invited to let out our own inner child as we experience the joy of owning this beautiful and expensive car.

Yet, I can't help but wonder: Is this really joy? Is this what joy looks like? Is this what joy feels like?

This is a season, of course, in which there is a concerted effort to manufacture joy by suggesting that it is essentially a product that we can buy, an experience that we can consume. From Black Friday right up until Christmas Eve, we often go to great lengths to convince ourselves that we can experience joy "on demand" by just purchasing this gift or consuming that product. Add a little joyful Christmas music, a few "fala la la la's" and you have a familiar prescription for an approach that we often rely upon to get us into the Christmas spirit.

But, is this really joy? Is this what joy looks like? Is this what it feels like?

Probing a bit beneath the surface, I'm inclined to have my doubts. Now, it's not that there isn't a certain amount of happiness and excitement to be found in such moments because there often is. Who wouldn't be excited to see a new car sitting in their driveway? The problem is that this excitement tends to fade and the feeling of happiness tends to diminish. Suddenly, the old patterns of life have resumed their familiar ways and genuine joy is nowhere to be seen.

This morning I would like to suggest that there is another approach to discovering joy—one that leads us in a very different direction. We find some important clues to this approach in our scripture lessons this morning.

In our lesson from the Book of Isaiah, the writer provides his readers, past and present, with a picture of joy. Here is the promise of the One who comes to announce the Good News of God's reign. There will be release for the captives and comfort for those who grieve—a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Here is the promise that God had not abandoned Israel and was, in fact, already at work, restoring this once proud nation to its former glory. But please note that this proclamation, as bold and glorious as it is, is not just about what God will do for Israel. It is also about the joy that the writer experiences in the privilege of being a part of this unfolding plan of God.

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness." (Isaiah 61: 10)

Do you hear the joy in these words? Do you feel it when you hear them read aloud? There is nothing manufactured or orchestrated here. These are words that come straight from the heart—words that offer a glimpse of what joy looks like, a taste of what joy sounds like. This is the joy that is discovered in the choice to assist God in the work of reconciliation and the work of restoration.

Fast forward a few hundred years to the Gospel of Luke and the testimony of Mary as she anticipates what God will do in and through her. This passage, of course, is known as the "Magnificat" and it reflects Mary's joy as she anticipates all that God would do in and through her and the child that would be born to her...

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary then goes on to the work that God would do in and through her and her child. God would scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God would bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly. God would fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty."

To be sure, Mary's understanding of what God would do in and through her was, in one sense, a bit terrifying. For she is proclaiming nothing less than a great reversal of the social structure of the time. The rich and powerful would be brought low and the poor and powerless lifted up. Mary certainly understood that such a reversal would not come about

without pain, struggle and conflict. And yet, she also understood that there was great joy in the prospect of being a part—an integral part—of God’s unfolding plan of salvation.

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Do you hear the joy in these words? Do you feel that joy when you hear them read aloud? Once again, these are words that are not fabricated or manufactured. They are words reflect a joy that is genuine—a joy that comes straight from the heart.

It is not by accident that the selected lectionary readings from both Psalms and 1 Thessalonians both contain references to joy this morning. The Psalmist remembers the return from exile by suggesting that “our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” The Psalm then concludes with the promise that **“Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”** (Psalm 126: 6)

The writer of **1 Thessalonians** offers up the admonition to: **“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”**

If we had the time, we could examine each of these texts in more detail. But, the critical point that even a brief overview of these texts makes apparent is this: **The joy that these writers give witness to is not joy that is contingent upon being in the right mood or receiving the right gift. It is not joy that depends upon everything going your way and all of the pieces of life’s puzzle falling neatly into place.**

No, the source of the joy that is lifted up in each of these texts has little connection with personal blessing or benefit. In fact, in some cases, it is quite the opposite. As the writer of 1 Thessalonians reminds us: **“Rejoice ALWAYS...Give thanks in ALL circumstances...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”**

If you would allow me to do so, I would like to get a bit more personal. I would like to invite you to reflect upon your own experience of joy—not the fabricated expressions that often masquerade as joy...not the manufactured definitions that merely give the impression of joy—but the real, genuine, authentic experiences of joy that aren’t contingent upon the fleeting or the fickle. Can you point to them? Can you identify their presence in your life?

It was the great playwright, George Bernard Shaw who wrote, “This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. Life is no ‘brief candle’ to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to the future generations.”

More than any other definition I know, this seems to capture the true essence of the experience and the expression of joy that is lifted up in our Advent texts this morning. More than any other definition I know, these words give witness to the fact that genuine joy in this or any other season has little to do with what we gain and everything to do with what we give. There is, you see, no greater joy than being used for a purpose that we recognize as a mighty one—one that will long outlive us and our brief time on this earth.

What does that purpose look like in your own life? What is the cause that might lay claim to your energies...that might lead you to be thoroughly used up when you die? My hope during this season of Advent is that the joy that you experience will be joy that lasts far beyond our often fevered and futile attempts to generate it. My hope is that you will uncover the source of genuine joy that enables and empowers you to live beyond the moment or the immediate circumstance of life. My hope is that you will discover the joy of living and of giving yourself away for others, for a cause greater than you, a purpose that will long outlast you.

It was Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa who exemplified this sense of joy that I speak about. He was persistently joyful even in the face of the great evil that was apartheid and all of the tragic circumstances that it created.

As the resistance movement against this oppressive system began to grow, Bishop Tutu was constantly watched and harassed by the South African police and soldiers who would do anything they could to threaten and intimidate Tutu and his colleagues. On one occasion, South African soldiers entered the sanctuary of the Church where Tutu was speaking and proceeded to line the walls as a visible reminder that they were watching and listening to what he had to say.

Not one to back down from a confrontation, Bishop Tutu didn't miss a beat. As the soldiers settled into their positions, he took a long look at them and then, with a joyous and even a gleeful expression, he said to them, "**Why don't you quit your fighting? Why don't you come over to our side and join us? You might as well because we have already won!**"

As history would, in fact, show that Desmond Tutu was absolutely correct. The forces for good and for God had already won and it was this knowledge that enabled him to be filled not with fear and anxiety, but with the genuine joy of knowing that God was using him and his colleagues to usher in a new era of justice, mercy and love. Can you imagine a greater joy than that?!

This is the kind of joy that is lifted up in our scripture texts this morning, the kind of joy that is made known to us whenever and wherever we allow God to work in and through us to usher in a new age—not of fear or threat or intimidation—but of peace, justice, love and mercy.

The Good News of the Gospel suggests to us that, in spite of the evil and the injustice of our world, in spite of the hatred and the bigotry that we see all around us, God is at work and in fact, has already won.

I can think of no greater joy than to share in this work, to be a part of this purpose, to be thoroughly used up in this mighty cause that will long outlast us. Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Amen.