

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
December 8, 2019
Theme: Are We There Yet? Joy
Title: Seeking the Joy in the Journey
Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10
Luke 1:46 - 56
Matthew 11:2-11

The irony does not escape me that this morning our Advent Focus is Joy and tonight is our Blue Christmas service, a time when we are very intentional about recognizing and accepting that we are not always feeling happy and excited at Christmas time. The reality for most of us is that this is a season of mixed feelings. There may be times when we are happy and laughing and having a great time and then there are other times when we want to cry and be alone with our feelings.

I think it is just not realistic for us to expect that we will feel only one way during this season. We have all experienced a variety of events in our lives and especially in this season, we remember them all. We remember the joy of a wide-eyed toddler seeing Santa Claus. We remember the excitement of giving and receiving the perfect present. We remember the holy and sacred moments of candles in a darkened sanctuary as we sing "Silent Night".

At the same time, we remember those who we love who have died and who we miss especially now. We remember jobs or health issues that impacted past celebrations. We remember the relationships that didn't work out the way we hoped that they would and the pain of those relationships ending. Sometimes we think we need to keep those memories to ourselves and not let anyone know how we are really feeling.

Saturday morning, I read a devotional called “It is Not Well with my Soul”ⁱ The author said that there is a false Good News that is draining our hearts and he called it the “Positivity Gospel”. He wrote that “It is a dangerous myth that belief should always leave us feeling good, that Jesus is the immediate antidote to despair, and that to experience something less than complete jubilation is to commit heresy.”

He continued, “We all feel the pressure to live without sadness or doubt, but that doesn’t come from God. The scriptures remind us that the journey with Jesus is just as often spent in the shadow places, the rough and darkened stretches where light and hope seem in short supply. We tend to see these moments as defeats, to imagine that they are places we need to emerge from in order to be properly spiritual – when in reality the low places are where we meet our Maker.”ⁱⁱ

I think the message that we really need to hear during this season and probably every day of our lives is that true joy is not about being happy or experiencing particular emotions. It is not about trying to generate a feeling that we are not experiencing. Rather true joy, as we point to it during Advent, is really the steadfast assurance that God is with us in everything that we experience in life.

When the angel speaks to Joseph in Matthew’s gospel, he proclaims a fulfillment from the prophet Isaiah that a virgin will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” In the Advent Study, Almost Christmas, Matt Rawle proclaims that in Jesus’ birth, “‘God is with us’ is no longer a theological treatise, philosophical framework or a helpful metaphor. Joy now has hands that will be outstretched to bless, comfort, and welcome.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The real miracle and celebration of Christmas is the Incarnation; God's decision and action to become human, to put on flesh and bones and come to us not only in human form but especially as a baby – the most vulnerable form of all.

Rawle expands this to say that later, the hands that will bless, comfort, and welcome, also “will be outstretched and nailed to the cross because we wanted joy on our own shallow and selfish terms. Joy now has feet that will walk with flawed disciples, feet that will be washed with tears, feet that will traverse into Samaritan land. These feet will also be bound together in an attempt to stop the scandalous work of God's grace, justice, and forgiveness. The presence of God now has a body – a body that will hunger and thirst, heal and feed. This body will be crucified and raised, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, this baby will defy time to become those gathered together, from generation to generation, in mutual and shared adoration of God. This joy is timeless.”^{iv}

You might have noticed that as the candles of the Advent Wreath were lit today, we lit two blue candles and a pink one. Rawle observes that there is a difference in the candles. “Hope is a future destination for which we dream and work. Peace is a daily discipline to put down the sword in whatever form it is known. Love requires a selflessness in order to be shared. Joy is different from the other candles we light during the season because joy cannot be achieved. Joy simply is a gift. Receiving joy often means we have to get out of the way and allow the Holy Spirit to move.”^v

Our reading from Isaiah is filled with this joy. Much of Israel is hilly and desert. Isaiah presents a vision where “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; and the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.”^{vi}

Isaiah goes on to talk about what will happen and it is more than just a transformation of the desert. We are told that people will see the glory and majesty of God and that they should then “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.” This is something they are to do for others – not for themselves. They are to encourage those whose hearts are fearful. In doing this Isaiah gives us “insights into the nature of joy. Joy is communal; joy is shared and sharable. It helps us reach out and gather up others, particularly those who aren’t yet experiencing the joy.”^{vii}

Healing is something that comes with the sharing of joy. Knowing that God is always present with us – even in the middle of the worst things we can imagine – means that we can also share that good news with others when they do not yet know or recognize that God is with them. When we share our experiences, some may ask how we could have made it through the real tough times in life. When we are able to share that it is God’s presence with us that helped us, we are being witness and helping others know that in the dark times we are not alone – and neither are they.

Isaiah tells us to “go and build up, and then healing will happen”. Then we can travel with others on the journey -traveling with joy – with the steadfast assurance that God is always with us. It is this assurance that gives the joy that we talk about and celebrate at Advent. It is the joy of being thankful for all that has been given, joy at the promise of Jesus coming to us, joy at the love that God has for us that caused God to come to us in the person of Jesus.

The passage tells us that God will come and the eyes of the blind will see, the ears of the deaf will hear, the lame will not only walk but will leap for joy and those who cannot speak will sing for joy.

Years later, when John the Baptist was going through a discouraging time these words would come back to give him encouragement. John the Baptist had with great assurance baptized Jesus and witnessed to him being the one for whom John had come to prepare the way. But now, in today's Gospel reading, John finds himself in prison. He is discouraged, wondering if he was mistaken, was Jesus really the one he thought he was supposed to be.

Remember that one of the prevailing hopes for the coming messiah was that he would overthrow the Roman government and establish the kingdom of Israel. Personally, I find it hopeful that even John the Baptist became discouraged and wondered. It reminds me; it reminds us that it is okay to have questions. It is okay to wonder.

John sends a messenger to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else?" Jesus' response is a proclamation of what he is doing, what he is really about, who the Messiah is to be. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Along with John, we can't ignore our questions. We can't ignore what is wrong in the world. If you are anything like me, I sometimes find that I have to turn off the news and take a sabbath from what is happening in the world. That is necessary so that I don't burn out. It's necessary so that I can re-engage with what's going on. It is also necessary so that I can pay attention to what is right in the world.

Along with John we cannot ignore what is happening around us, but we can pay attention to what is right in the world. Jesus told John's messenger to tell him what they saw and heard; that the blind see, the

lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Where do we see this happening today? Where do we see Jesus' ministry in the flesh? Where do we find ourselves being agents of joy bringing good news to others and witnessing to God's presence with us? We may not often see the blind literally seeing, and the lame walking, and the dead being raised, but we can witness people having insights and seeing in new ways, we can witness people hearing what they had not been able to hear previously; we may be agents who bring good news to those who need to hear it most.

This week we are the hands and feet that are responsible for a little over \$1100 in gift cards being distributed to families through Adopt-a-Family to help share God's love and presence with parents for whom the ability to buy presents for their children may become a sign of that love. This afternoon, we will join in singing Christmas carols at Aldersbridge as part of our witness of love and joy in this season. Tonight, we will gather to create a safe space for people to acknowledge and accept whatever emotions they are feeling this season. Food going to the town hall for distribution, is a tangible way of sharing God's love and feeding those who are hungry.

There are many ways that we are being the hands and feet of Christ in our world. When we see God's story in our world, we remember that although we gather together to worship on Sunday morning, that is only the beginning. Bishop Weaver used to say that our Sunday morning worship should be like a launch pad, sending us out to act on what we have heard and proclaimed in our worship.

This third Sunday of Advent reminds us that God’s joy – the assurance of God being with us is true not only at 10:00 on Sunday mornings, but also at 9:00 on Monday morning at work, and at 5:00 in the evening at the grocery store, or wherever we are. Advent and Christmas help us see where we have previously been blind, hear where we have previously been deaf, leap where we earlier could not even walk, and experience new life in the places that have seemed dead to us. It is a reminder and proclamation that we are agents of joy to a world that is desperately in need of joy even if only for a moment.^{viii}

ⁱ Pavlovitz, John. Low – An Honest Advent Devotional. Devotion for Week 3 Saturday.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Devega, Magrey et al, Almost Christmas: A Wesleyan Advent Experience. Chapter 4 by Matt Rawle “An Altogether Joy” p.94

^{iv} Rawle, p. 94

^v Rawle, p.93

^{vi} Isaiah 35:1-2a

^{vii} www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship Notes on Advent 3. Are We There Yet? Joy.

^{viii} This paragraph is inspired by a similar paragraph from Matt Rawle.