

Out of the Darkness: Joy

Luke 1:39-45

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Grandmother, a teacher, was sifting through all of the Christmas presents given to her by students and their parents at the kitchen table when three year old granddaughter asked, “Grandma why do you have so many presents?” to which she replied, “Because I know so many kind and generous people who want to give me presents.” Granddaughter said, “I know why so many people give you presents, Grandma. It’s because you are the best person on the whole planet!”

Grandmother explained to me that this was one of those “I could have died and gone to heaven” moments in life. There are few things better in life than when you are adored by a grandchild. It is a moment of pure joy.

Although in short supply joy comes in a variety of forms including surprises.

The European Union formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its totalitarian communism would adopt Beethoven’s 9th symphony as its anthem. During Christmas 1989 in Berlin, Leonard Bernstein directed an international orchestra and choir performing Beethoven’s 9th symphony, with its fourth and concluding movement commonly referred to as the “Ode to Joy” after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Now that’s joy!

Joy can come in every day forms as well. Getting an “A” on a test when you thought you didn’t do so well; your team winning a game against a heavily favored opponent. The moment your spouse said “yes” to your proposal of marriage; making your last mortgage payment. For a potter joy comes when the door of the kiln is cracked open after a firing and the fire’s transforming magic is discovered on something you made out of clay; we call it “Christmas morning”.

Remember that joy as a kid when you found yourself surrounded by family in front of the Christmas tree?

In our gospel lesson this morning for the fourth Sunday of Advent, we hear the story of Mary’s encounter with cousin Elizabeth just after Mary has learned that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit to give birth to the savior of the world.

Although very different in circumstance the two women have much in common.

Both are unexpectedly ‘great with child’; Mary as a young girl pregnant before her marriage, Elizabeth an old woman, long after it was expected she would ever be a mother.

In the Abrahamic covenant of the Hebrew people (Genesis 12:1-3), a Bedouin people dependent on childbirth for social security, people equated faith with progeny. Israel was to be a great nation with as many children as the stars. If you disobeyed sexual laws or failed to have children it was an affront to the community’s religious expectations. As a result both women are objects of shame in their culture; for Mary pregnant before the wedding, for barren Elizabeth.

Both women will see their sons die prematurely as political dissidents; John the Baptist beheaded as a threat to Herod, Jesus crucified as a threat to the Roman occupation of Palestine.

And when both women meet in our text this morning, they have in common their joy.

The apostle Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." (Phil. 4:4) What the Bible describes as "joy" is a lot different than what the world means with that word. We often equate joy to be the result of wealth, comfort and the satiation of our appetites. Happiness come when we are admired by others and free to do what we want. That is not what Paul had in mind (Note: Phil 1:4, 2:18, I Thess 5:16).

Paul is in jail as he writes "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." He will be imprisoned a number of times before he is finally decapitated by Roman authorities. Paul will be beaten and stoned by mobs, flogged, tortured and starved almost to death, three times he will be ship wrecked, all in the "joy" of the Christian life (II Cor 11:24-29).

The apostle is talking about a happiness not dependent on circumstance but a joy discovered within, even in the darkest times life can offer. We often think of joy as escape from the pain of this world. Paul finds joy in the midst of its suffering.

Old time ranchers will tell you that their favorite cattle were the Herefords. In the heavy winter storms of the prairies, with freezing rains, below zero temps, violent winds and ice, most cattle turn their back to the storm and slowly drift downwind, mile upon mile. Finally, intercepted by a boundary fence, they pile up against the barrier and die by the scores. But the Herefords act differently. Cattle of this breed instinctively head into the wind. They stand shoulder to shoulder facing the storm's blast. You most always find the Herefords alive and well after the storm. A rancher is quoted as saying, "I guess that is the greatest lesson I ever learned on the prairies...just face life's storms." (Norman Vincent Peale, Treasury of Joy and Enthusiasm, Fawcett Press, 1981)

The peace of God cannot be found by running away. If all you are doing is hiding from the feelings of a broken heart that is not the peace which God offers. God is near even in the storm. That's worth rejoicing about again and again.

At 88 years of age, John Wesley passed away on Wednesday, March 2, 1791. His last words were spoken twice, with great fervor, "The best of all is, God is with us." He lifted his arms and said again, "The best of all is, God is with us." (James Lawson (ed), Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians (General, 2009) *John Wesley* by Albert C. Outler) Of course, that's also the name of Jesus, "Emmanuel" which means "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23).

The joy Mary and Elizabeth share at the moment of their encounter...the joy that causes the baby to leap in Elizabeth's womb...is the joy knowing that even while their nation is under foreign occupation, while they have had to personally face the scorn of shame, even in the mystery of being swept up in divine history, their joy is to know that God is with us.

What an amazing story!

Joseph is an aging carpenter from a back-water village in the middle of no-where. A pious and generous man he will contemplate divorcing his pregnant betrothed quietly, discretely rather than disgracing her and her family as was Joseph's right.

Mary may be 13-14 years old. She had no claim to social status or rights other than what could be gained in a marriage.

Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, well in her 60's will give birth to John the Baptist who will herald the messiah. Zechariah, the old priest of the Jerusalem Temple and Elizabeth's husband, will be stuck dumb by the same angel because he found the events incredulous. He is simply the first of many of the pious who will completely miss the point about God even when divinity is born right in their midst.

Mary and Joseph find no room at the inn. The man who will die labeled "The King of the Jews" is born in the poverty of a stable. This holy family will have to flee for their lives as political refugees to Egypt.

The first to investigate the Bethlehem manger are shepherds, considered rift-raft by their contemporaries. The first to worship the new born king are gentile soothsayers, considered outcasts by the pious, these "wise men" that followed the promise of a star.

That we continue to repeat this story and be inspired by it 2,000 years later describes the power of its mystery. It transcends history and rationale. It touches the heart of the human relationship with God and promised hope. It is no accident we remember it at Winter Solstice when the earth turns towards the resurrection of Spring in the darkest time of year.

One of the high points of the year at St. Paul's UMC, Reno, Nevada is Christmas Eve. A small but mighty congregation throughout the year, on Christmas Eve everyone comes home and fills the small sanctuary to sing Christmas carols, light candles and participate in the annual Pageant. It is the tradition of that church that a baby born during the year is chosen to be the baby Jesus in the manger scene and their parents get to be Joseph and Mary. In a small congregation that doesn't get too many new babies each year, it's a big honor!

In 1987, while Bonnie and I were serving St. Paul's, Drew Gerthoffer was the baby Jesus for Christmas Eve.

Drew Gerthoffer was born at the beginning of August, the fourth child of Bill and Betsy. It was about a week after his birth that the doctors discovered a vascular abnormality in Drew's brain that withheld blood supply to a crucial part of the body. He needed emergency surgery, immediately if he were going to survive and no Reno area hospital or surgeon could provide it. Drew and his parents were flown down to UC San Francisco Medical Center on an emergency medi-vac flight.

Ironically, I was in San Francisco at the same time with my sons Dan and Matt, staying at my brother's apartment just a few blocks away from UCSF Med Center. We were on vacation attending the Giants baseball series against the Houston Astros. You'll recall that the Giants won two of those three games, losing only to hall of fame pitcher Nolan Ryan on August 7th and that the Giants would go on win their division that year. They went to the playoffs that October losing the last of seven games against the St. Louis Cardinals in part because home plate umpire Eric Greg called Will Clark out on strikes in the top of the ninth inning with a pitch that was clearly out of the strike zone.....please excuse me, we were talking about joy...joy!

So, anyway, Bonnie called me early one morning that August in 1987 to tell me about baby Drew Gerthoffer who was scheduled for an emergency brain surgery with medical instruments no bigger than a human hair. Bill and Betsy had called not knowing I was already in San Francisco and asked Bonnie if it would be possible for me to go over to the hospital and pray for them and Drew before the surgery.

The boys and I went right away. We found the frightened parents in the waiting room as the surgeons had just told them that it didn't look very good for Drew. I went into the Neo-natal ICU, robed and gloved and prayed with Drew through the rubber hands of an incubator machine.

To make a long story short, Drew is now in his third year of college at the University of Nevada, Reno studying to be a teacher like his father. Thank God we have doctors and nurses dedicating their lives to the miracles of healing!

And when we sang Silent Night on Christmas Eve 1987 at St. Paul's UMC, with Drew in the manger as the baby Jesus, and Bill and Betsy in old bathrobes as Joseph and Mary, every person in that church knew joy. Pure, unadulterated joy.

Last Sunday evening pastor Dirk renounced the tradition of preaching a "what's all wrong about the Christmas, anti-materialist diatribe" as he unashamedly embraced the beauty and joy available in this season. He inspired and challenged us all to make this a celebration of love that would last everyday of the year:

"Because love came down at Christmas... 'love shall be our token, love be yours and love be mine, love to God and neighbor, love for plea...and gift...and sign'... love that motivates us to take ornaments off the Angel tree; love that calls us together with friends and family; love that has inspired some of the greatest music of all time; love that has even had the power to stop wars, if only for a day. Love that allows itself to be as vulnerable as a newborn baby. Love that is so strong not even death can stop it."

When Elizabeth and Mary embraced in the desperation of their shame and hope, as the babies in their wombs jumped for joy, they knew somewhere in the depth of their hearts that in spite of the madness of their...our...world, love gets the last word and the light of such promise has and will always overcome the darkness...now that's joy!

Amen.