

IN SEARCH OF THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Advent 3: The restoring face of God

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126:1-6

Eleven days til Christmas.

As usual, about this time,

lots of talk about “the Christmas spirit.”

We’re all trying to “get into the spirit of Christmas.”

That means different things to different people, of course.

But generally, the “Christmas spirit” means

feelings of hope, peace, joy, optimism, generosity,

friendship, family, community.

Bottom line is, the Christmas spirit is joy. It’s happiness.

And it’s supposed to be contagious.

But this year, there’s a complicating factor in the Christmas spirit.

The economy.

Listen to these news headlines from the last couple weeks:

How to Renew Your Christmas Spirit with the Economy in the Dumps

Sour Economy and Layoffs Dampen Holiday Spirit

Layoffs Could Put a Crimp in the Christmas Spirit

Shortage of Money Endangers the Christmas Spirit

Can Retailers Get Consumers into the Christmas Spirit?

It’s clear that our culture makes a direct connection

between the Christmas spirit and money,

between happiness and our ability to buy, spend, and consume.

But that should come as no surprise.

All year round, every minute of every day,

we see evidence that our culture believes

happiness is something that can be bought.

And *buy it we do*.

People literally try to purchase happiness by the dose:

by the bottle, by the shot, by the joint, by the hook-up.

And don’t think this just applies to drugs and sex.

All of us, at some level, at one time or another,

try to purchase happiness.

Whether in rich food, stylish clothing, sporty cars,
exciting entertainment, or exotic travel.

Or simply buying new earrings, or a cool gadget,
or a Kline’s chocolate peanut-butter in a waffle cone . . .

We buy in the hope that it might pull us out of our doldrums.

Maybe it’s an effort to stave off sadness or maintain happiness.

Maybe we buy because we like the sense of euphoria it brings,
the momentary comfort, the feeling of pleasure . . .

even if the feeling is fleeting, which it always *is*.

Now I don’t think anyone here truly believes, deep down,

that money can buy lasting happiness.

And that’s certainly not our conscious motivation,

every time we go to the grocery, or department store,

or enjoy dinner and a movie.

But I do think we are all on a quest for joy,

for deep and lasting happiness.

And on that quest, we are likely to try many different paths.

And most of those paths don’t lead us very far.

It’s not that the quest is wrong.

Not at *all*.

On the contrary, it’s what God wants us to do.

To pursue joy. To seek the full and abundant life.

Every year on the third Sunday of Advent, Joy Sunday,

the message of the scripture readings

is that there is a way provided that leads to joy.

There is a path, and God wants us to walk it.

There *is* a Christmas spirit worth pursuing.

But it has very little to do with sluggish retail sales,

or a falling Dow Jones,

or a diminishing 401K,

or rising unemployment.

We have a lot to learn about joy in our scriptures.
Let's look first at the prophet and dreamer Isaiah.
The words of Isaiah 61, told by Tilli Yoder,
should surprise us, more than finding high Christmas spirit
in the middle of economic collapse.
Isaiah said to a lost people, in exile, abandoned and without hope,
"I'm here to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.
This is the year of the Lord's favor."

Right in the middle of the people of Israel's deepest suffering,
when they stood ankle-deep in ashes,
the dreaming prophet said,
"I'm here to give you a garland instead of ashes,
to comfort all who mourn,
to anoint you with the oil of gladness,
to place on you the mantel of praise."

Oh *yeah?* Where was Isaiah's evidence?
On what grounds did the prophet have the nerve
to tell the people to cheer up, everything's going to be fine?
When the soil was hard and dry and cracked,
how could Isaiah *dare* talk about green shoots springing up?

The joy Isaiah was dreaming about
was *not* joy based on happy circumstances.
It was joy based on a larger vision.
Isaiah was driven by a vision that came from God,
a vision of a peaceable kingdom
where God's reign was unhindered,
where lion, wolf, lamb, and kid would live together in peace.
Isaiah's dream was faithful dreaming,
not wishful thinking.

Wishful thinkers try to ignore present painful reality,
and imagine something new and beautiful into existence.
Faithful dreamers do not deny the darkness that is,
but they start with the light.

They begin with God and God's purposes for creation,
which cannot and will not, in the end, be thwarted.

Faithful dreamers see with the eyes of faith.
They don't close their eyes to the facts.
If they are standing in the middle of a dry river-bed,
they admit that the soil is dry and hard and cracked.
But they refuse to let their lives be defined and ruled by that fact.
They allow themselves, by faith, to sink their toes in the mud
and watch the fish swim by.
They dream God's dream.

We heard the same faithful dreaming this morning
in 1 Thessalonians, where Paul could tell persecuted Christians
to rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances.
And in the Gospel of John,
where in the midst of crushing oppression from Rome,
one of the darker periods of Israel's history,
John the Baptist could come and, as it says,
"testify to the light."

So maybe that's the path to joy that all of us are looking for:
Learning how to dream God's dream.
Maybe that's the secret to living in a Christmas spirit year-round:
Seeing with the eyes of faith.

Well, yes it is, but something is missing.
Let's get practical. Let's get real.
If all we can say about living above the sorrows of life,
is "have more faith" . . .
If the only message of the church to a society gripped by fear,
is "dream God's dream" . . .
then I'm afraid we're going to lose some folks.

Because society has all kinds of practical solutions for our fears.
And they're for sale.
What alternative do *we* have to offer?
Well, I happen to think the church *has* a better alternative.

And it's both simple and practical.
And I guarantee it will work.
Three things we can do to stay on the path to joy.
Tell stories.
Stick together.
And love what God loves.

Number 1, tell stories.

That's what Psalm 126 was about,
which we read a few minutes ago.
The people were singing their story.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Back then . . . our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
Back then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."
The Lord *has* done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Past tense. This psalm is a look back . . . a history lesson in a song.

The psalmist says to the people, "*Back in the day...*
remember what God did,
and remember how we laughed?"
Finding the path of joy, *requires* looking back.
Joy is rooted and nourished
in the memory of God's acts of mercy.

Recalling the works of God in the past,
is the way we get oriented on this path of joy.
We can't find our way down a hard path,
without knowing from whence we came.
And to keep alive the memory of God's mercy and goodness,
we have to be intentional, diligent.
We have to retell the stories. Over and over again.
Our culture is obsessed with anything and everything new.
That's what drives the so-called "Christmas spirit"
in the retail sector.

The desire for something else new.
As a culture, we're losing the skill of cultivating memory,
of valuing where we have been.

Joy is rooted in a deep familiarity with the God
who has been faithful to God's people throughout history,
and is *not* going to abandon us now in the crisis of the day.

The second practical activity on the path to joy,
is sticking together.

Maybe you didn't know that Psalm 126
is part of a series of 15, from Psalm 120-134.
They're called the psalms of ascent.
You'll see that subtitle in your Bibles.
It is believed that the people sang these psalms
while they were on pilgrimage to the temple.
The temple was on top of a hill, Mt. Zion.
Thus, psalms of *ascent*.

Picture a huge crowd of pilgrims,
men and women and children.
Out in front are the musicians playing trumpet, lute, and drum.
All are singing this song together, in rhythm with their steps,
slowly and steadily making their way together
uphill toward the temple.
The key part of this picture, of course,
is that nobody is walking up that hill alone.

They're each walking it themselves, but not alone.
They have other pilgrims nearby to lift their spirits
when they get weary,
to encourage them, to egg them on.
There are other pilgrims by their side,
to maintain joy on their behalf,
when they don't have the personal capacity to sing.

Sometimes we need people to pray what we cannot pray,
to see what we cannot see.

Our pilgrimage is a pilgrimage of the people.
We walk together.
We encounter obstacles together.
We arrive together.
We meet God in worship together.
There is *no lasting Christian joy*
without being in community.

The third thing the church can do in an anxious and fearful culture,
is to love what God loves.

Maybe the most important five words in Isaiah's dream
were in verse 8: "I the Lord love justice."

Justice, or righteousness—same Hebrew word—
is what God is all about.

It defines the mission of God.

God's love and longing is to restore justice in all creation.
God is the One who created all things right and just
to begin with.

And after creation, God said, "This is very good."
By those words, God declares what God loves.
God loves creation that is in harmony and peace,
each creature fulfilling its God-ordained part.
All in right relationship.
All reflecting God's justice.

So it stands to reason,
that if we want to walk the path of joy,
we must orient our lives around what God loves.
We will value what God values.
We will live in the righteousness and justice of God.

You know, if we were created in the image of God,
doesn't it make sense that we will be most alive,
and most fully human,
and most joy-full,
when our passions line up with God's passions,
when our loves match God's loves,

when our values reflect God's values.
If we were created in God's image,
we will be at our best
when our lives accurately reflect that image.
When we love what God loves.

So the more familiar we are with what moves God,
with where God's heart is,
and the more we pursue that,
the more joy we will know in life.

God's heart is reconciling all people and creation to himself.
God is moved to deep compassion for the poor and the suffering,
God has a longing to restore those who are lost and wandering.
Our path to joy
is a path oriented around those longings and loves of God.

In no way is this a denial of the sadness and tragedy and struggle
present in our lives in this world.
In no way is this a suggestion that we should *not*
weep and grieve and lament and protest the darkness around us.
The brokenness of the world is a reality.
But it is not our starting point.
We were created by God and for God.
We were created in love and for love.
We were created with joy and for joy.

Even while we weep and mourn the sorrows of life,
there is a deeper current, an underground river so to speak,
that is a river of joy . . .
if we have aligned our loves with God's loves,
our purposes with God's purposes.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that a culture oriented
around self-fulfillment,
around satisfying individual drives and desires,
around the accumulation of material wealth and power,
is a culture that, when times are hard,
get paralyzed by fear, anxiety, and self-doubt.

We as a church have an alternative to offer the world,
if we make it our practice—
our continual practice, and our sacred practice—
to tell stories
to stick together
to love what God loves.

We will be a people of joy
when we live as a community of memory
that commits itself together
to orient itself around God's mission and passion.

We will be a people,
who even in the midst of the most dire circumstances,
can say with full confidence,

Faithful and true is the word of our God.
All of God's works are so worthy of trust.
God's mercy falls on the just and the right;
Full of God's love is the earth.

We who revere and find hope in our God
Live in the kindness and joy of God's wing.
God will protect us from darkness and death;
God will not leave us to starve.

God of creation, we long for your truth;
You are the water of life that we thirst.
Grant that your love and your peace touch our hearts,
All of our hope lies in you.

God of life,
rain down your love and your joy on your people.

Let's sing together #49 in *Sing the Journey*.

—Philip L. Kniss, December 14, 2008