Thoughts on Joy

Unity Church December 22, 2024

Selections from the Old Testament, John 15:9-17

Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat,

please put a penny in the old man’s hat,

If you haven’t got a penny then a ha’penny will do,

if you haven’t got a ha’penny then God bless you!

I don’t know about you, but I can hardly believe that this year is nearly spent and we find ourselves coming up on Christmas. My cousin says that Amish ways die hard, and I don’t know whether it was religious conviction or financial reality, but my family didn’t make a lot of fuss about Christmas. As you might imagine, this is a source of contention with Sherry, who grew up in a family that did.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not really a Grinch, although I have been accused of being one. I must confess that in the times I’ve been so accused, I could have pled guilty. One can have all the facts and history on their side until it collides with the person they hold most dear in life, at that point, it is best to simply shut up and go along. There is wisdom in the old saying, “Happy wife, happy life.”

It’s also difficult to maintain my attitude toward Christmas while leading a flock with Christmas traditions more in line with Sherry than myself. This being said though, allow me to cite some history as we approach this sacred holiday.

We talk at Thanksgiving about our Puritan forbears at Plymouth and how they celebrated the first Thanksgiving in the New World. These same folks banned the celebration of Christmas, saying "the feast of Christ's nativity is spent in reveling, dicing, carding, masking, and in all licentious liberty...by mad mirth, long eating, hard drinking, lewd gaming, and rude reveling!” In the late 1500’s, clergyman Hugh Latimer wrote, "Men dishonor Christ more in the 12 days of Christmas, than in all the 12 months besides.”

 1

Most of us don’t like to be reminded that the majority of our Christmas traditions came from Anglican England, the reign of Queen Victoria or Hallmark Cards, but that’s a different subject for a different day. The Anglicans figured out a long time ago that it’s easier to sell the revelry of Christmas than the dark story of the passion of Christ. There’s one feast day at Easter, but twelve at Christmas, you do the math.

So today is the 4th Sunday of Advent. We’ve celebrated the Sundays of Hope, Peace and Love. Which closes the circle with Joy. It’s interesting to me that we spend 4 weeks focused on something that the Jews spent centuries anticipating. The oldest prophesy I read this morning is from Moses, in the book of Numbers which was written sometime around 1500 years before the birth of Christ, the one from Isaiah was written some 750 years after Moses, but still 750 years before the coming of the Messiah.

To put that into perspective, it would be like us having waited since 516AD, just 190 years after the Council of Nicea, or 1266, about the time of Thomas Aquinas, to realize the promise of this coming Messiah or Christ. From another perspective, this waiting could be compared to our waiting, our anticipation of Christ’ return, which we’ve been doing for more than 2000 years.

Without attempting to be a wet blanket, I find it difficult to imagine how anyone can maintain these four things, Joy, Hope, Love and Peace, for a lifetime, let alone centuries and generations. In the light of this realization, maybe Advent presents us with an opportunity to recall the event of His coming, or His returning, and in recalling, re feel, re remember, re dream. Maybe it’s like a small stone or shell that we picked up on our last vacation, something that simply holding it in our hand or looking at it, floods us with memories, takes us back.

What is this Joy? it’s something we see all over the place in posters and Christmas cards this time of year, something we sing about in various Christmas Carols. It’s interesting though, that a word which appears 242 times in the NIV Bible seems to be something that few of us talk about during the rest of the year. When we do it seems more like an historic idea as opposed to a present tense reality.

 2

Webster defines it as a feeling of great delight or happiness, as caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying. This one word in English is used to translate eight different words in Hebrew and four or five in the Greek. What’s even more interesting is that the English definition talks about having a state of being or a feeling, where almost all of the Greek and Hebrew words are action verbs, rejoicing, boasting, making merriment, welcoming, embracing, singing, shouting, dancing. Ours is an emotion to have, theirs is a reality to demonstrate. I get the feeling in looking up the definitions of the biblical words that the Jews and Greeks were a tad more boisterous than we are.

Granted, if we had someone here who bounced around like a puppy, singing and laughing out loud constantly, we would probably presume that they were off their meds. Presbyterians aren’t known for their overwhelming emotionalism. By and large, we tend toward being somewhat reserved and not wearing our emotions on our sleeves, Thank you very much. We tend to wonder about those who laugh too loud, cry too easily. In our world, emotions are something to be guarded. One can never be quite sure what might happen if they were to get out of control.

Your joy is not mine, nor is it the same as the person beside you, even your spouse’. It’s a feeling, an emotion, that is yours, not mine. I can’t tell you intellectually how it should be or feel to you. It’s an emotion, which by definition means it is not rational. I may share a similar emotion that I call joy, but your joy and my joy are different.

Then again, I don’t think it is the goal of Advent for all of us to be feeling the same emotion, to the same extent, in the same way. Maybe this emotion drives us toward the action verb of being joyful, the demonstrative joyfulness that the Old Testament Jews and the New Testament Christians wrote about and did, which came out of remembrance, a realization, an understanding of where they were before the Almighty found them and where they are now that He had found them. Maybe it was a recognition of what had been given to them. It should be a recognition of what has been given to us.

 3

Another way of looking at joy is that like the other candles we light for Advent, it is foundational, not only to our faith but to our daily lives. I have said throughout this Advent that the 4 candles of Hope, Peace, Love and Joy are four corners of the same cloth. I think I said last week they are hallmarks or things that we are called to as believers.

I said earlier that the Greeks and Hebrews must have been somewhat more boisterous than we are, but I don’t know that that is the point. I think that more than jumping around like a crazy person, this Joy is a foundational strength. An assurance of who we are in Christ, what we have become because of this great gift given so long ago.

How many of us remember Comforters? You might have called them something else, but if you grew up in a house heated by a coal fired furnace, you remember cold bedrooms. There was a Lane cedar chest in the hallway of our old farmhouse and in the winter, Mom would pull out these thick, heavy blankets that went on top of everything else on your bed. They were weighted blankets before weighted blankets were a thing, and if you also had flannel sheets, they kept you snug throughout the night, even though there was frost on the inside of the bedroom windows.

When I think of Joy, I think of that warm comforter, or two maybe three of us piled on the couch under a blanket, or sleeping on the living room floor in front of the fireplace. I realize that I have just painted a picture of a state of being as opposed to an action verb.

Possibly I’m driving at the idea that Joy comes out of Peace, or Peace comes out of Joy. There’s a reason that a kitten or most any other baby animal will sleep after nursing. It’s not that they’re worn out from the exercise, it is that they are sated, they are filled. Sherry will tell you that’s why I head for the couch after lunch.

Possibly a poor analogy, but like the kitten with it’s full round tummy, curled up for a nap, we have been fed, we have been sated, we have been surrounded by our heavenly father fulfilling his promises, his prophesies, his son. In this realization we have everlasting joy.

 4

Numbers 24:17 (ESV)

17 I see him, but not now;

    I behold him, but not near:

a star shall come out of Jacob,

    and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;

Nehemiah 8:10 (RSV)

10 Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Isaiah 49:13 (KJV)

13 Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the Lord hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted.

Isaiah 51:11 (KJV)

11 Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away.

John 15:9-17 (RSV)

9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 This I command you, to love one another.