

Sorrow and Joy, Love and Longing in Advent

Matthew 2:16-18; Luke 2:25-35

As the Worship Board and I were planning Advent and its theme, *The Advent of Joy*, we thought about those who walk through sorrow in this tinsel, jingle-belled season. But there's a place for them too, for you too, us too in Advent. Advent is a season of sorrow and joy, love and longing. So came this sermon with my cello.

I

He has become known as “the cellist of Sarajevo”. It was May 28, 1992 and Sarajevo was under siege. For centuries Muslims, Croats and Serbs lived in peace, a city of three religions and three peoples.

But civil war had broken out, and the day before twenty-two persons had been slaughtered while waiting in line for bread at a local bakery. On the day after the massacre Vedran Smailovic, lead cellist of the Sarajevo opera orchestra took his cello to the street, sat outside the bakery and began to play. What he played there, amid the noise of bullets and heavy artillery was the *Adagio in G-minor* by Albinoni. He would return for 21 more days in honor and memory of each of the deaths, in lament and protest. During those 22 days other musicians joined him.

II

Advent is a season of sorrow and joy, love and longing all amix. Our texts today bring the sorrow and sadness of the world into the Christmas story. For it is not a fairy tale without shadows; Jesus is born into a world of sorrow, tragedy and the doing of evil.

So, in the midst of his Christmas narrative Matthew places the horror of the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem. King Herod, paranoid at the news of a child born to be king, sends his storm troops to murder every male child under two years of age in Bethlehem. As Matthew tells the story, he quotes from the prophet Jeremiah:

A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing a loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be consoled, because they are no more.

The poet May Sarton in her poem, "Of Grief" writes:

There are some griefs so loud
They could bring down the sky,
And there are griefs so still
none knows how deep they lie,
Endured, never expended.

There are old griefs so proud
They never speak a word;
They never can be mended....¹

Rabbi Abraham Heschel has said that grief has three levels. The first is silence, the second is tears and the third, most profound, is song.

Song, the right kind, can help us heal our sorrows. The old hymn, “Come, Ye Disconsolate”, invites us to bring our sorrows to church and to God.

Come, ye disconsolate, where’re ye languish,
Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.
here bring your wounded hearts,
Here tell you anguish:
Earth has no sorrow that heav’n cannot heal.

There is a tragic dimension to life. Some wishes cannot succeed, some victories cannot be won, some illnesses cannot be healed. It is our human condition. Miguel Unamuno called it “The Common Weeping”. Some things lie beyond blame and cause. We lift our sorrows and the sorrows of the world to God.

III

The second gospel text gives us the words of old Simeon who had waited all his life for the Messiah to come and redeem Israel. He saw Mary and Joseph in the temple who had brought 8-day-old Jesus to be dedicated. Now seeing the child he knows his wait is over. He blesses mother, father and child, and he then tells Mary that it will not be easy. “And a sword will pierce your own soul too”, he said. “Mary did you know?”

It struck me while preparing this sermon how many Advent hymns are in a minor key. For Advent is a season of joy *and* sorrow, of longing for what is *not* here, but is to come.

We long for redemption and healing, for justice, for deliverance, for peace, for love.

Here is our best known Advent hymn in a minor key:

O, come, O come Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to **thee**, O Israel.

Commented [SS1]:

Even our Christmas carols sometimes voice our sorrow and longing—as in the carol we sang today, *It Came Upon A Midnight Clear*. Here is the third verse:

And ye, beneath life's crushing load
Whose forms are bending low
Who toil along the climbing road
With painful steps and slow.
Look now! For glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing.
O, rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing.

III

Sue and I have been reading a remarkable book by Susan Cain entitled *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*. Her previous book, *Quiet*, about the value of introversion in an extroverted world, became a best seller.

In her new book she investigates how sorrow and joy and longing together lead us to wholeness. Music can lead us there. For her, one

example is the music of Leonard Cohen, and his oft recorded song “Hallelujah”. And his words like these:

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering,
There is a crack in everything,
That’s how the light gets in. (“Anthem”)

Have you gone to a movie or heard music and said, “I’m not going to cry, I’m not going to cry!”, but here came a sob, and then the tears streaming down your face?

For some the last movement of Beethoven’s 9th with its “Ode to Joy” does that. Beethoven had been working on a musical setting for “Ode to Joy” for three decades. In the latter part of those decades, he became deaf and fell into despondency. He avoided public occasions and resisted telling anyone he was deaf.

In the midst of his deafness he finished the 9th Symphony. On opening night he conducted the symphony with all his skill and might, though he heard not a note. At the end he stood there. All he could hear was silence. The first violinist went to him and turned him around. What he saw was the concert hall filled with people standing, applauding, tears running

down their faces. It was the joy, not just the joy we experience now, but also the joy we are longing for.

All his life C.S. Lewis, the 20th century's most famous convert to Christianity, had been filled with the deepest longing for beauty, truth and love. Then on the road to his conversion he discovered that God was the source of the longing and its true satisfaction. We long, he wrote, for "the scent of a flower we have not yet found, the echo of a tune we have not yet heard, news from a country we have never visited." This longing led him to God. There are moments we experience such beauty, and we feel what he called "the stab of joy." Have you ever felt that?

IV

Susan Cain discovered in her research what poets and philosophers have been telling us through the centuries: "that our longing is the great gateway to belonging." ²

She tells the story of the writer of the Pixar movie *Inside Out*. Last Sunday Sue was teaching the children and they were discussing "What is the color of Joy". Several immediately said "yellow". They had seen the movie *Inside Out*, where yellow is the color of the character, Joy.

Pete Doctor, the writer of the movie, already had two top hits for Pixar: *Up* and *Monsters, Inc.* As he set out to write a movie about our feelings, the main character was Fear, his side-kick Joy. But nothing was working. He grew despondent and wondered if he could finish it, or write any other movie.

Then came the answer. The main character should be Sadness, not Fear. It is sadness that takes us to joy, sadness that connects us all. Our fears divide us, and drive us apart. It is our wounds that connect us.

In America, Cain observes, we value happiness so much we have built the pursuit of it in our founding documents. A computer search turned up 30,000 entries about happiness. Sadness is often relegated to a negative emotion, from neurotic to pathological. But sadness can lead us to compassion and to connection.

Our sadness and longing can lead us to wholeness. Can we be broken and whole at the same time? A favorite old hymn suggests we can. Written in a time of immense personal sorrow, it leads us to a place where sorrow and wholeness come together. Here are its words:

When peace like a river
Attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”

In Advent we can bring our sorrow to church, our own and that of the world. We can bring our longing for a better world. We are headed toward joy. As the Psalmist says:

Weeping may tarry for the night
but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5)

In this life and in the world to come