

“God’s Joy Comes Down From Heaven”
Mike Magee - Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 , John 1:6-8, 19-28

Joy is God’s Gift

Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, begins with the statement, "Life is difficult." In a sequel to that book, he begins by saying: "Life is complex."

Some of us grieve over an illness. Some of us grieve the loss of a loved one. Some of us grieve unreconciled friendships or marital relationships. Some of us grieve our loneliness.

Life is both difficult and complex, but Advent is a season of hope. The prophet Isaiah cries out to God, "O that you would rend the heavens and come down . . ." We affirm during this season of the year the most basic teachings of our faith that God has come down into our world through the person of Jesus Christ. The Word has become incarnate and now life does not seem as daunting, as frightening, as dreary or as gray.

Someone once said: "If you are at the stage or age of life when your back goes out more than you do, do not let your aches get in the way of your alleluias." That's a good message for us.

Today’s reading from Isaiah is about joy. And John the Baptizer points us away from himself to Jesus. Jesus is the source not just of our hope, peace, and love, but also our joy. But what is joy? Is it an emotional explosion, or is it like being at peace? Deeply felt peace?

Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary tells us joy is the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.

Another dictionary tells us joy is the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; keen pleasure; elation.

Sometimes a word is used too many times, and loses its true meaning. So we look for synonyms, words that mean the same thing, to give us a better understanding of a word. A synonym dictionary tells us words that mean the same thing as joy are pleasure, bliss, cheerfulness, gladness, delight, fruition. And that words with the opposite meaning, or antonyms, are sadness, grief, sorrow, and misery.

We discussed Hope a few Sundays ago. I believe the Hope which God sends us in Jesus is the Hope that we will have an end to our sadness, grief, sorrowfulness, and misery in the future. And hope for our resurrection into God’s abundance. That is, the Hope that we will have Bliss in the future. But I believe the Joy which God sends us in Jesus, is the Word that God wants for us the fullness of God’s abundance, not just in the future, but also now. That God wants all of us to be Joyful now, not just after we die, but now. Not just in the bye and bye, but now. God sends us Joy from heaven 2000 years ago, yes, but also each and every day, if only we have eyes to see it. And God wants us to share our Joy with others. Not hoard our Joy. But share it. Share the Joy. But some folks think Christian joy is the same thing as Christian peace.

Joy is Part of Spiritual Shalom

Oprah Winfrey defines joy as a sustained sense of well-being and internal peace - a connection to what matters. Sister Kathleen Flood, a local spiritual director, also tells me that Peace and Joy are related. That true Peace and true Joy are almost the same.

I have mentioned before that the word peace is the closest word in the English lexicon to the Hebrew word Shalom. But Shalom and Peace are NOT the same. Shalom is the Hebrew word for wholeness. Physical, mental, and spiritual wholeness. A wholeness God wants for all of us, but which many of us in our post Modern world do not have. You have heard me say before that we might be physically whole, that is physically well, but be spiritually broken. Or we might be spiritually whole, but physically broken. And you have heard me say that if I could not have both, and could choose which one I wanted, I would choose physically broken and spiritually whole. Peace is a component of Shalom, but is not the same as Shalom.

When I reflected this week on the meaning of the word Joy, and I remembered that Peace is a component of the more encompassing Hebrew word, Shalom, I finally realized Joy and Peace are also not the same. I realized that one can be at peace and not full of joy. In my medical practice as an oncologist, I have seen patients who are at peace with their impending death, but anxious about what heaven and our own resurrection is like. Is our personal resurrection into God's abundance like becoming a drop which falls into the ocean, or is the heaven into which we are resurrected a perpetual passing of the peace like we do on Sunday mornings? Personally I hope the heaven into which we are resurrected is like a perpetual passing of the peace. Because that is something I understand and enjoy. But I do not really know. The only thing I can assure my patients about heaven and our resurrection is that nothing, not even death, can come between us and the love of God. My point is, if I were to be told tomorrow I only have six months to live, I really truly would be at peace because I am confident nothing can come between us and the love of God. I have that confidence because of the words and ministry of Jesus, the one to whom John the Baptizer points. On my deathbed, I will have hope for my resurrection. But I will not truly be joyful because I believe I will miss the warm touch and voice of my wife, the warm touch and voice of my children and daughter in law, the warm touch and voice of Natalie, my grand daughter, and the warm touch and voice of the congregation of Brentwood First, this church I truly love.

So I believe that peace and joy are not the same. We can be at peace when we are given bad news, but not truly joyful. I believe the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love God sends us in Jesus are all components of our spiritual wholeness. Are all components of our spiritual Shalom?

In Advent we look at the gift God has sent us in the person of Jesus. More than just a baby in a manger. In Jesus' words, ministry, sacrifice, and resurrection we learn of the four components of the Shalom, or wholeness, which God desires for us. In Jesus' words, we learn the true meaning of unconditional Love. In Jesus' healing and feeding ministries, we learn of the Joy he wants all of creation to have now, not just in the bye and bye. In Jesus' sacrifice, we learn of the Peace we too can have in adversity. And in Jesus' resurrection by God, we learn of the Hope that there is more to our existence than the short span during which we walk the earth. We learn that no one is beyond the power of God's reconciliation and

redemption. Love, Joy, Peace, and Hope. The four components of Spiritual Wholeness. The four components of the Spiritual Shalom that God wants for us all now, not just in the bye and bye. Yes in the bye and bye. But also now. Learning to live in the present moment is part of the path of joy.

Joy is shared in community

A sad-faced woman comes up to a newly-ordained pastor and said, "It's a grand thing you are doing as a young man - giving up the joys of life to serve the Lord." That woman's attitude reflects a commonly held belief that to be serious about our faith means that we expect all joy to be taken out of living. For many, Christianity appears to be a depressing faith, with unwelcome disciplines, that cramps our lifestyle and crushes our spirits.

In a Doonesbury cartoon a few years ago, an officer is standing by the bedside of a Navy sailor who is in sick bay aboard a cruiser. The officer says, "We've got you scheduled for surgery at four bells tomorrow! Your surgeon will be Commander Torres." As he leaves the officer says, "Well, take care, sport. I'll see you tonight during rounds." The sailor is puzzled and says to the officer, "What exactly do you do here?" The officer replies, "I'm ship's morale officer." And wide-eyed, the sailor says, "You mean, a ... a chaplain?" And the officer replies, "No. No. I really do cheer people up!"

How sad that this word joy which Isaiah uses in our text for today is so often thought to be the very opposite of faith! What a commentary that is on some Christians - people who talk about rejoicing before the Lord but who give little evidence of that joy in their living. When you turn to the pages of the Bible, you find that word joy or its variants being used more than 350 times in the scriptures. Not just in Isaiah, but the whole Bible.

Coming home late one rainy evening this week, you know which one, I was short on patience and a bit uptight. It was the pressure of a medical practice with too much to do and too little time to do it. That evening, I planned to write a sermon on the joys of sharing! As I began, I realized I needed a better frame of mind ... more joy in my own sharing

As I reflected, I was reminded that joy is neither something to be tied to weather, nor tied to a work schedule. There is no such thing as more joy-less work, more work-less joy. Christian joy is not affected by wages: large raise - great joy, no raise - no joy. Joy in discipleship is something that transcends the ups and downs of living. It is bigger than the shifting sands of weather, work, or existence.

Christianity is a religion of joy and excitement. There is nothing unhappy about it. It is for people who want the joy that comes from being involved in something worthwhile. Once you taste the joys of sharing yourself, you'll notice that your life will have more meaning.

The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.

If you were all alone in the universe with no one to talk to, no one with which to share the beauty of the stars, to laugh with, to touch, what would be your purpose in life? It is other life, it is love, which gives your life meaning. This is harmony. We discover the joy of each other.

Mark Twain said, "Grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of joy you must share it with others."

Conclusion

There was an era in the 1800's, the Victorian era, when many considered it a sin to be happy, to have joy. Folks thought we are supposed to suffer and be miserable during our life on earth. There are some folks even today, who when they hear laughter or see other folks having fun, believe something contrary to God's plan is happening.

But what makes God sad is not our merriment, but our sadness. God is present in our sadness, yes, but desires for us joyfulness.

And God's Word tells us God does not want us to hoard our hope, our peace, our joy, and our love. God does not want us to hoard our Shalom. God wants us to share it. This is the true meaning of Christmas. God sends hope, peace, joy, and love down from heaven. God sends Shalom down from heaven in the form of Jesus. In response to God's gift of the birth, life, Words, ministry, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus, in response to God's gift of Shalom, we share our Shalom with others through our own words and deeds. Our Shalom finds its fullest expression when we pass it along to others, as we do symbolically in the passing of the peace. Because there is no Shalom without community. You see, Shalom is not an individual thing. For Shalom does not abide, it multiplies.

All Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...