

“Joy To The World”

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UCC at The Villages
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3rd Sun. in Advent

Isaiah 42:1-11

Luke 2:1-7

‘Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;

let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,

your presence let them shout from the top of the mountains.’ Isaiah 42:11

Let us pray... O God,

Let us know the joy of being in your presence that we may be guided

in what goals to set and what direction to take in our life journeys of faith.

Amen

Today is the Third Sunday in the season of Advent when we reflect on
the theme of “Joy”.

So, what is joy? What does joy mean to you?

Joy is different from happiness, isn't it?

Happiness is more about attitude and having emotional flexibility
in the midst of whatever comes our way in life.

A person has to work at being happy,

because it is much too easy to get side-tracked onto pleasure-seeking
and take detours of selfishness.

However, joy is more about something that happens to us – we are seized by it,
caught unawares, and we want to stay there on the mountaintop.

Then again, wanting to ‘stay there’, craving for euphoria,

is what gets people trapped by drugs and other addictions –
which in the long run is anything but joyful.

The author C.S. Lewis entitled his autobiography, Surprised By Joy
as the overarching theme of his life

describing how he grew to become a Christian.

The title has a double meaning in that Joy was also the name of the woman

whom he would meet late in his life and love, marry and later lose to cancer.

In a lifetime pursuit of joy – which is different from the pursuit of pleasure
or material wealth, he realized that you can't hang onto joy.

Joy comes and goes in our lives and ultimately, joy only serves to be a signpost –

it is only meant to serve as a guide to let us know we are on the right path.

Joy can happen to us regardless of our circumstances

as “Aha!” moments of inexplicable wonder.

A friend of mine puts it this way: “God strikes again!”

Willard, p.2

The birth of Jesus Christ is such an event we associate with joy
of which we have a very nostalgic vision.

When we think of the Nativity, don't we imagine a stable with
Mary in blue and white, kneeling as she calmly gazes upon the Christ child,
nestled in swaddling cloths on a bed of straw.

Joseph stands, hovering protectively while cattle and donkeys,
shepherds and sheep, magi and camels all gather about
with a brilliant star and angels overhead.

The narrative tells us this event came as a marvelous surprise
that seized shepherds and wise men, peasants and kings alike.
But what about this joy?

The actual situation itself would seem pretty desperate in which
a man and his pregnant wife have traveled hundreds of miles,
and she gives birth upon their arrival,
with no shelter except the outdoor structure where the big animals feed.
They were alone and tired, with a newborn and in the company of strangers.
This is hardly joyful...

By the way, we have a manger on our property –
about a 100 yards behind us, by the fence of the lot to the south.

It is just a lean-to where bales of hay could be opened up
for cows and horses to have shelter and eat.

Not very big at all, but would be room enough for a couple with a baby
to sit under or even stretch out underneath its flimsy roof.

But would you consider spending a night there
even here in the Florida tropics?

I think the nostalgic vision would fade after the first hour.

Whether you believe these events took place in the way they are described or not,
the stories of Jesus' birth are in the Gospels for a reason –
and joy is part of the story...

*It so happened that a church middle school youth group decided they were going
to produce the Christmas program that year as an updated nativity story.*

All the major characters were there –

Joseph & Mary, the shepherds, the wise men from afar...

*They even got one of the mothers – who happened to be pregnant,
to play Mary...*

*Shortly after the production began, however,
the director noticed Mary was missing!*

Willard, p.3

*Then, they heard from behind some bales of straw moaning and groaning –
“Mary” was actually in labor!*

*A doctor who happened to be in the audience was then ushered onto the stage
and disappeared with Joseph behind the bales of straw.*

*After a few moments, the doctor emerged from backstage
with a jubilant smile on his face and holding a baby in his arms.*

*He then announced to the audience,
‘It’s a God!’*

[adapted from story by Pastor Jim Kane]

<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/humorous-illustrations-about-nativity.asp>

The story of a vulnerable baby born in threatening circumstances is significant
because it’s about God coming to Earth to share our common lot.

We might expect God to show up in some spectacular way –
like a king riding into town on his white horse.

Instead, our God comes to town in the way that all of us have –
as a baby being born.

There are a lot of risks these days, but even more so in that time
for a woman to have a child.

Yet, the simple joy of a newborn is a common experience for all human beings,
everywhere, and throughout the ages.

What is so different about this joy is that it introduces us to a God
who is willing to risk and suffer, but also play the game of being human
and provoke joy.

The joy of discovering God in the story of the Nativity has inspired
the composition of many great works of art, music, poetry, and lyrics.

One of the most celebrated is Johann Sebastian Bach’s
“*Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*”.

We are most familiar with Isaac Watts’ lyrics in English...

Jesu, joy of man's desiring, Holy wisdom, love most bright;

Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring Soar to uncreated light.

Word of God, our flesh that fashioned, With the fire of life impassioned,

Striving still to truth unknown, Soaring, dying round Thy throne.

Through the way where hope is guiding, Hark, what peaceful music rings;

Where the flock, in Thee confiding, Drink of joy from deathless springs.

Theirs is beauty's fairest pleasure; Theirs is wisdom's holiest treasure.

Thou dost ever lead Thine own In the love of joys unknown.

Willard, p.4

This joy speaks to the 'agony and ecstasy' of human desire,
of 'dreams deferred' and crushing defeats – like football games,
of love 'in spite of doom'.

Jesus is there for us when things fall apart, because he has been there himself.
He was born in deprivation and died in desolation.

It was in the midst of such circumstances that Christianity was born
when something happened to change despair into joy –
when Jesus returned in triumph to free us all
from the Win-Lose of life to Win-Win.

The original lyrics to "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" were in German
written by Martin Jahn and a word for word translation
of his words into English is as follows:

*Well for me that I have Jesus, O how strong I hold to him
that he might refresh my heart, when sick and sad am I.
Jesus have I, who loves me and gives to me his own,
ah, therefore I will not leave Jesus, when I feel my heart is breaking.*

*Jesus remains my joy, my heart's comfort and essence,
Jesus resists all suffering,
He is my life's strength, my eye's desire and sun, my soul's love and joy;
so will I not leave Jesus out of heart and face.*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesu,_Joy_of_Man's_Desiring

These are beautiful words and they have no direct connection to the narratives
about Jesus' birth, but they are sung at Christmas-time,
because they touch on the beauty and joy
of what Jesus' words and deeds are all about.

This song is about the Messianic hope of those who heard the prophets so long ago
and the promise of God's ongoing presence for us in the message that
God is still speaking in our time and time beyond time.

Another song about the joy that dares us to see wonder in everyday things –
like the birth of a baby, is familiar to us especially this time of year...

*Joy to the world! the Lord is come; Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing, And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.*

Amen

Our lesson from Isaiah 42:1-11 [Revised Standard Version] describes the Suffering Servant- a Messianic figure whom the people of Israel believed God would send to rescue them from Babylonian exile. During this time of the Jewish people's history, their understanding of God was beginning to expand to see that God is concerned for all people and nations...

- [1] Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.
- [2] He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
[3] a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
- [4] He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.
- [5] Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread forth the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
- [6] "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,
[7] to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
- [8] I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to graven images.
- [9] Behold, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them."
- [10] Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants.
- [11] Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the top of the mountains.

Luke 2:1-7 [RSV]

[1] In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus
that all the world should be enrolled.

[2] This was the first enrollment,
when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria.

[3] And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.

[4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea,
to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem,
because he was of the house and lineage of David,

[5] to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

[6] And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered.

[7] And she gave birth to her first-born son
and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger,
because there was no place for them in the inn.

Inspired by Luke 2:1-7

NOW, THE TIME HAD COME

**WHEN A DECREE WENT OUT FROM CAESAR AUGUSTUS
THAT A CENSUS BE TAKEN OF THE EMPIRE.**

THIS WAS THE FIRST CENSUS,

WHEN QUIRINIUS WAS GOVERNOR OF SYRIA.

**AND EVERYONE HAD TO JOURNEY OUT TO BE ENROLLED,
EACH TO THEIR OWN HOMETOWN.**

AND SO, JOSEPH WENT UP FROM THE GALILEE

OUT OF THE TOWN OF NAZARETH TO JUDEA,

**INTO THE CITY OF DAVID, WHICH IS CALLED BETHLEHEM,
BECAUSE HE WAS OF THE HOUSE AND LINEAGE OF DAVID.**

HE WAS TO BE ENROLLED WITH MARY,

WHO WAS ENGAGED TO HIM – WHO WAS ALSO PREGNANT.

BUT WHEN THEY ARRIVED AT THIS PLACE,

'THE TIME HAD COME' FOR HER TO GIVE BIRTH.

AND SHE BROUGHT FORTH A SON, HER FIRSTBORN CHILD.

AND THEY WRAPPED HIM UP IN SWADDLING CLOTHES

AND LAID HIM DOWN IN A FEED-TROUGH,

**BECAUSE THERE WAS NO PLACE FOR THEM
AT THE TOWN INN.**