

Title: “Yearning for Joy”

Series: Yearning for God – Advent 2011

Scriptures: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and Luke 1:8-20

Date Used: December 11, 2022

Focus: We find the joy we seek not in the ever-changing circumstances in life, but in doing God’s will and in our relationship with Christ.

We have probably all asked the question to a child coming in from school, to a spouse after coming in the door from work, or to a friend, “How was your day today?”

What we generally wanted to know by asking that question was, “What were the circumstances of your day like?” What kind of things happened today that were good, bad, or even indifferent?

Isn’t it amazing how often we allow the circumstances of our lives to dictate our level of joy.

When I was a child on more than one occasion my parents said to me, “We can always tell how your day at school went by how you close the door.”

We can allow our level of joy and contentment in life to be dictated by the circumstances we must deal with.

If good things happen throughout the day, we’re generally happy. If things don’t go so well, we can let those events rob us of our joy.

A buddy of mine that attended seminary with me in a north suburb of Chicago would often allow his mood on Monday mornings to be determined by the traffic he encountered on his drive to the north side of Chicago from western Michigan. If you know Chicago traffic, you can understand that most Monday mornings he was not very good company. Yet, there was also this part of him that wanted to find joy and contentment. He just didn’t feel that the circumstances would allow it.

As a culture we also tend to yoke our level of joy in living with stuff. We find joy in our homes, joy with our cars, joy in our televisions, joy in our computers, joy in our cell phones and other technology. Joy in... you fill in the blank.

I know of a guy that when he was not working you would find him in front of his computer. He was always on that thing... playing games with his friends, chatting with his buddies. To be on his computer brought him joy. Well, his computer died, as they do, and he became miserable.

And he didn't have enough money to purchase another computer right away and he didn't know what he was going to do. (I suggested grief counseling.)

He became so down about the loss of his computer that after a while his wife agreed that he could take a loan from his pension program so he could purchase another computer.

When our joy in life is largely linked to things we cannot completely control – circumstances of life we can only partially control, things that we acquire that will eventually wear out – we are connecting our joy to things that are always subject to change. In other words, we are allowing our joy to be determined by things that are beyond our ability to control.

A firmer foundation for our joy is what we find in the Biblical tradition. One of the sources of joy that is celebrated in scripture is the joy that comes out of fulfilling God's purpose for one's life. It is a joy that is linked to something beyond the circumstances of our lives.

The prophets we read about in the pages of the Old Testament often had a difficult task to fulfill. Many of them had to relay a message of destruction to the people of Israel and Judah. They told the people that God was going to allow foreign armies to destroy their lands and lead the people away into exile as a punishment for their sins. It was by no means a message that people were excited to hear.

It would have been much easier to be one of the prophets that emerged during the period of the Babylonian exile that had the task of relaying a message of hope.

But even though the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah and several other prophets had this difficult message of doom and gloom to convey, they did it anyways. I'm pretty sure, especially since they included themselves in the words of judgment from God, that they did not find any delight in delivering the message they felt called by God to deliver.

Their joy did not come out of the particulars of their work, but out of the satisfaction of knowing they were doing what God had called them to do.

Even though Mary and Joseph were told that they were going to become parents before they were even married – and initially that must have been a source of great distress – as you read their story you get a sense of the joy they experienced in knowing they were fulfilling God's plan for their lives.

I think that is equally true of our lives today. I have seen people work in professions that I cannot begin to imagine would bring joy to anyone's life - paramedics, crisis counselors, or working in any math related field – to name just a few. But when you talk to the people who believe that God called them to work in one of these particular areas, they speak of the satisfaction their work brings to their lives.

It is a sense of joy that comes from knowing they are fulfilling God's purpose for their lives.

Another source of joy that rises above the circumstances of life, is joy people experience with knowing that God is present in their lives.

You get the sense that many of the figures we encounter in scripture experienced this deep sense of joy in their lives, a sense of joy that comes from knowing God.

I believe that one of the most revealing scriptures on this topic comes from the book of the prophet Habakkuk. As the prophet waits for the Babylonian army to attack and destroy the city of Jerusalem, he states:

“Though the fig tree does not blossom,
And no fruit is on the vines;
Though the produce of the olive fails,
And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock is cut off from the fold,
And there is no herd in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.”

Habakkuk is saying, “Looking at the dismal circumstances we are about to face, there is no rational reason to be happy or to have any joy, but I will, because my joy is in God, the source of my salvation.”

I have seen this perspective at work in people's lives. Several years ago, I was at the desk at Akron City Hospital, and the volunteer working the desk asked me, “Are you a pastor?” I said, “Yes.” She replied, “You look like one.” I guess we're a type.

At that moment another volunteer walked up to the desk and the woman seated at the desk pointed to the woman that just came to the desk and said, “She is another volunteer. She has already volunteered over 1,000 hours.”

I looked at her and said, “That is an incredible gift to give to people.”

She said, “Well I’m actually a nurse. But I took a couple of years off to care for six family members who were dying.” She went on, “But, I am going to start back to work again in the new year so my husband can slow down a little bit.” She explained that her husband suffered from MS and that he needed to get a little more rest.

I said, “You have been through a lot.”

She replied, “I have been, and I couldn’t have done it without God.” Despite what she had been through, when she spoke about her relationship with the Lord, there was joy in her eyes.

The joy we find in and through God transcends the circumstantial and ever-changing circumstances of life we all too often want to base our joy upon.

From the teachings of Saint Paul, we come to realize that joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Joy is not some behavior we merely put on. Joy is not circumstantial. According to Paul, joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit that followers of Jesus bear when our lives are filled with the Holy Spirit.

This lesson came home to me as I stood in the middle of the slums in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 1984. Along with 11 other students from Mount Union College, I traveled to Haiti over spring break to learn more about life in a developing nation.

Two days earlier, we had been standing in a foot of snow in Alliance, Ohio, now we stood in the middle of a hot, humid, and smelly slum. We were all complaining to each other about the intensity of the sunlight, the heat and the humidity and the smell that came from the open-air sewer.

We stood outside of an 8x8 shack where an elderly blind woman with arthritis lived. It was the first opportunity we had had on our two-hour tour of the slums to see inside one of the many shacks made from corrugated tin and cardboard. The woman sat on a stool that had been fashioned from a small shipping container. She had a small table with a tin can on it that served as her drinking cup. There was a cot with a single old blanket laid out on it that completed the furnishings of her home.

Our guide served as our translator as we spoke to this elderly woman. We sang a few hymns together including “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”. Then this woman through the translator said, “I have no misery because I am a Christian.”

Blind, crippled by arthritis, hardly a thing to her name, living in the most impoverished nation in the western hemisphere and she said, “I have no misery because of my relationship with Christ.”

Her source of joy was clearly not the things of life. Her joy did not come out of the circumstances of her life. Her joy came from Christ. Her joy was the outgrowth of the presence of the Holy Spirit in her life.

At times in my life when I get upset about the way the car is running, or when it is not running at all. When there is water in the basement or some other frustrating circumstance of life that wants to rob me of my joy, I remember that woman living in the slums of Port-au-Prince.

The source of our joy is the Spirit of Christ that resides in us.

The source of joy is the satisfaction we find in living the purpose filled life Christ calls us to live.