

Christmas Day

Sunday, December 25, 2022

The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Times Square, New York City

Propers: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98:1-6; Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-14

by Father James Ross Smith

Joy is a life-giving and essential thing. Joy is also elusive and unpredictable. Sometimes joy feels distant and unattainable. Anxiety, fear, loneliness, and depression can trick us into believing that joy is not for us. And it is true: joy can be fleeting. It is not an everyday emotion. We may desire joy, but we cannot summon it. It is like the spirit, blowing where it will. I'm not entirely *sure* that joy is an emotion, but let's call it one. Joy is not happiness, or contentment, satisfaction or coziness. It is none of those emotions and it is different from all of them. Joy happens in odd and unexpected moments. And it does not require pleasant circumstances to come to life. We may wonder: Is joy possible in Ukraine or on Rikers Island this morning? Who can say? In the end those questions do not belong to us, because joy is blessing and grace. It is God's gift. It is not ours to give.

The Bible contains every kind of emotion, I think. It contains rage and envy, resentment, violence, and sin. But there is much joy in the Bible. Over and over again, the biblical writers praise joy and evoke its power. The Bible would not be the Bible without joy.

From the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall

blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God . . . He will come and save you’” (35:1–4).

In the Bible, joy is the unbidden response to the sudden intuition that God has come up close, and has come to us for good and not for harm. In the Isaiah passage, joy emerges when life conquers death and goodness overcomes evil. Joy happens when one senses the presence of God. And that joy is a powerful thing: it banishes fear and strengthens us for the journey.

Joy is an element of every Christian liturgy and celebration. But Christmas is special, isn’t it? Joy is woven into Christmas like a golden thread. Joy seems, for better or worse, to be essential to Christmas. Joy appears in our hymns and carols and poems and in all those Christmas novels and movies. Why is this?

From the Gospel of Luke: “And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is

born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (2:9–12).

From the Gospel of Matthew: “When [the Wise Men] saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him” (2:10–11).

Joy belongs to Christmas because at Christmas it becomes our task to tell once again the story that the evangelists tell, to say, “Look! God is right *here* and I did not know it—or I forgot it, or couldn’t see it, or I did not have eyes to see it, or I didn’t want to see it, but, still, Christmas comes and we read those essential stories in Matthew and Luke and we are reminded once again that God is *here*, intensely present in that small, newborn boy taking his first breaths, just like we did, crying out wordlessly, “I am alive,” just like we did. But, of course, this child is different, this child is sacrament, the electric, shining presence of God, God revealing that God is doing what God does: loving what he creates. God loves us and loves us so much that he becomes what he has created, so he can come to us more intimately than we ever expected, doing this so he can pursue us like lost sheep, so he can teach us, heal us, awaken us, change us, bless us, save us, and forgive us for all those things we thought could never be forgiven. And when we are lucky, we let Christmas in and we see once again that it is God’s eternal and

unchangeable nature to beget and send the One who is Wisdom, Son, and Word, to invite this Word to take on flesh of our flesh and to live among us, not randomly or arbitrarily, but as Jesus of Nazareth, who is Jesus the Christ, the Promised, Prophesied and Expected One, Emmanuel, God-with-Us. And when we are really lucky and truly blessed, there is joy, if only for a moment, when we intuit that God's love, God's reaching-out-to-the-whole-creation is at the very heart of things.

This is the story that today's gospel passage wants to tell. John, like Matthew and Luke before him, bears witness to the presence of God revealed in Jesus Christ, but he does not tell the story in the same way: there are no shepherds. There is much light but no star, no wise men, no infant, or Mary, or Joseph. It is hard to say exactly what these verses are or were meant to be. They are a kind of summary, but they are not a creed. They may once have been verses of a hymn. To me, they seem like a kind of poem, meant to be read and memorized, or chanted and prayed. The climax of these fourteen verses is the last verse, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (1:14). The verse proclaims the central belief of the Christian faith: Jesus Christ, visibly and fully human, is simultaneously the only-begotten One, the Son who is with God, who comes forth from God creatively as Wisdom and Word, but who is not *just* with God, but *is* God. And what we see as we read on is that the union of divine and human in Jesus Christ is not random or arbitrary: "The law

indeed was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart who has made him known" (1:18).

"Who has made him known": that is the meaning of all the Christmas stories. In the beginning God creates the heaven and the earth. In the wilderness, God brings Israel out of slavery and accompanies her into the Land of Promise. The Holy One of Israel dwells in the Holy Temple and speaks through the words of the Prophets, and in these last days makes himself known in the child in the manger, the child who is worthy of the Wise Men's worship. Christmas reminds us that we have not invented God or dreamed him up. God is alive and comes to us. And sometimes, so does joy. Not always, of course. Who could handle that? Who can be joyful all the time, at least in this life? After all, I suspect there's a Scrooge and a Grinch that live in the recesses of every human heart. But we don't have to invent joy, we just have to expect it and let it surprise us. And knowing that, we go forth to make Christ known, each in our own way, but always with the same goal. As Jesus says in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. 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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (15:9–12).

Copyright © 2022 the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, New York City.