

2019 12 15 – Joy in my Soul

Isaiah 35:1-10

Several times already this morning we have prayed, talked and sung about joy. In our call to worship we said that during this service we would “ready our hearts to receive the gift of joy.” During the lighting of the advent candles we heard the words, “May this gift of a candle’s defiant flame remind us of God’s gift of joy!” In our opening prayer we thanked the Holy Mystery for the gift of joy in our souls and then we sang about the “joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts.”

That’s a lot of joy. So what do we really mean? What does it mean to receive God’s gift of joy? What does it mean to ready our hearts for this gift? Some of you are probably sitting there thinking, “Yes, I may have said or sung or heard those words, but they don’t really apply to me. There’s no way I can be joyful. There are just too many difficult things happening in my life right now. My heart is full of fear, disappointment, anger, pain, sadness or maybe even grief. I couldn’t possibly find room for joy.”

That’s probably the way that the Israelites were feeling. The Israelites were the people that the prophet was speaking to in today’s scripture reading. Biblical scholars tell us that this particular prophetic vision was written at a time when many of the Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon. These prophetic words were probably spoken for the first time when the Israelites had been in exile for around fifty years.

We know that most people only lived to about forty years of age in those days, so this means that an entire generation had come and gone during their exile. Yet their connection to their country, Judah and especially their holy city, Jerusalem was still as strong as ever. The people of Judah, many of whom had never lived there, desperately wanted to go home. Their hearts were filled with sorrow and a deep longing for what they had lost.

There are many in our world today, who feel this same pain of loss and longing. Near to our hearts are the Etmeh family, who escaped from war torn Syria and arrived here in Swift Current nearly four years ago. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, as of January 2019, 70.8 million people were displaced worldwide. Refugees are forced to flee their homes for many reasons. The most common causes include war and civil war, human rights violations, and, of course, climate change. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee_crisis

Many of us struggle to feel joy because we feel so deeply the pain of others: the sorrow of those in exile, the suffering of those who are hungry, cold, or lonely, or the ache of a hurting planet. Many of us struggle to feel joy because we are overwhelmed with the pain in our own extended families. Many of us struggle to feel joy because we are the ones who are hurting.

So what does it mean to feel joy in the midst of all this pain? What does it mean to sing, "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart," when you really feel like crying?

Let's first talk about what it doesn't mean. Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is an emotion and it's an emotion that is connected to the circumstances in our lives. People tend to be happy when things are going well. Happiness feels good. Happiness is a sense of contentment and well-being.

In today's scripture reading the prophet is describing a time when things will be better for the Israelite people. He says, "the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing." He describes a wonderful time when:

The eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert.

I would argue that it will be easy for the Israelites to be happy when their circumstances change and they find themselves back in Jerusalem, back in the city they know as Zion. Happiness is an emotion based on circumstance.

But joy is different. Joy is deeper. Joy is connected to spirit. Brené Brown, author of *The Gifts of Imperfection*, describes joy as, "a spiritual way of engaging with the world that's connected to practicing gratitude." (*The Gifts of Imperfection*, page 78) Through her research, Ms. Brown talked to hundreds of people and she wrote:

Without exception, every person I interviewed who described living a joyful life or who described themselves as joyful, actively practiced gratitude and attributed their joyfulness to their gratitude practice. Both joy and gratitude were described as spiritual practices that were bound to a belief in human interconnectedness and a power greater than us. (*The Gifts of Imperfection*, page 78)

Happiness can be brought about through changes in our life circumstances, but joy only comes when we change ourselves, when we change the way we view our lives. Joy is not dependent on circumstance. It is dependent on our ability to recognize and acknowledge all the things in God's creation, in our world, for which we can be grateful. Joy is possible even when we are not in circumstances that make us happy.

I want to share with you a true story:

Anthony Ray Hinton spent 30 years on death row for a crime he didn't commit. He was working in a locked factory at the time of the crime he was being accused of. The police told him he would be going to jail because he was black.

His time in jail was spent in solitary confinement in a five-by-seven-foot cell, allowed out only one hour a day. But, Hinton quickly became a friend and counselor to other inmates and the death row guards, many of whom begged Hinton's attorney to get him out.

[Finally,] a unanimous Supreme Court ruling ordered his release and he was able to walk free. In an interview he is quoted saying:

“One does not know the value of freedom until it is taken away, People run out of the rain. I run into the rain...I am so grateful for every drop. Just to feel it on my face.”

Hinton is a strong example of the ability to respond with joy and gratitude despite horrendous circumstances.

He’s quoted in another interview:

“The world didn’t give you your joy, and the world can’t take it away. You can let people come into your life and destroy it, but I refuse to let anyone take my joy. I wake up in the morning and I don’t need anyone to make me laugh. I’m going to laugh on my own, because I have been blessed to see another day, and when you’re blessed to see another day that should automatically give you joy.” <https://medium.com/@willkrieger/the-world-didnt-give-you-your-joy-a-story-of-gratitude-10f24fe26f96>

There are many ways that we can practice gratitude. Some people create gratitude journals. Others ask themselves every night, “what happened today that I am thankful for?” Still others try to be present to the small gifts that life brings even as they are happening: a baby’s laugh, a smile from a stranger, a or a little bunny hopping along the sidewalk. In fact, coming to worship every Sunday is also an act of gratitude. Part of what we do here, is thank the Ground of our Being for all that we have given, including life itself.

I received an email this week that reminded me that even though there is much that is still broken in this world, in many ways the world is getting better. For instance, starvation-level poverty has decreased by 80 percent since 1970 and when we look at health, education, security and freedom, the world is improving. Even when we look beyond ourselves, there are many reasons for gratitude.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-world-is-doing-much-better-than-the-bad-news-makes-us-think/2019/12/02/25086e72-1532-11ea-8406-df3c54b3253e_story.html

I believe that the prophet in today's reading was also reminding the exiled Israelites that they had reasons to be grateful. He was reminding them of the faithfulness of their God and the many ways that their people had been blessed in the past and would be blessed in the future.

Gratitude and the joy that follows are building blocks for making positive changes in our lives. Joanna Macy, creator of the *Work that Reconnects*, tells us that practicing gratitude is the first step in tackling the issues that are impacting our world. (*Active Hope*, page 56) As Christians, we refer to this work as the building of God's reign of peace and justice. As Christians, we look to Jesus' life and teachings to guide us in this task.

So in this Advent time, we look forward to Christmas, the celebration of Jesus' birth and we sing hymns with words of justice and joy:

When God is a child there's joy in our song.

The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong. (*Voices United*, #7)