

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte, NC
December 14, 2014
Rev. Pen Peery

Joy, Unleashed
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim release to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
To provide for those who mourn in Zion –
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
The oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruin,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
They shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations...

For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
All who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with garland,
as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

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There are eleven days left. Eleven days until Christmas morning. Eleven days to trim the tree, hang the stockings, plan the menu, finish your shopping.

There are eleven days left. Eleven days to put on your smile, to spread good tidings, to get caught up in the joy of the season. Eleven days. The pressure is on.

So what happens if – at this time of year when you are supposed to be joyful, and lighthearted, and free from worry...a beacon of Christmas Cheer – what happens if you can't be those things?

A friend and member of my preaching group voiced what every preacher knows – that when we stand here and look out at our congregations we see people's faces, but we also their stories. "Sometimes I wish I could just name them all, out loud," she said, "to help us see our common humanity that the [false] strength we wrap ourselves in attempts to hide."¹

Grief. Shame. Economic anxiety. Job loss. Broken relationships. Crises of faith. An abiding sense of loneliness. Miscarriage. A crushing feeling of responsibility. Substance abuse. Depression. Cancer. Poverty. A lack of purpose or direction.

Are any of these your story?

I know they are.

I see these stories when I look into your faces.

There are eleven days left until Christmas – eleven days to cave into the pressure to have it all together and to be "joyful." And yet for many of us, all the lights, carols, presents, and parties in the world can't cover up the fact that we are not joyful – at least not in the sense that we see marketed during this time of year.

The foundation of joy is hope. And for us, too often, our hope is misplaced in the things of this world – those things that will always disappoint.

The pastor and scholar Will Willimon talks about this contrived sense of joy and hope in an article written a few years ago. He asks, "If we are doing so well, why do we drink so much at parties? If things are so great, why must we so forcefully reassure ourselves [of that fact] and silence those who disagree? If we are so happy, why must we talk about it so much?"

And then Willimon gets right to the point, "The hope for us, says the church in Advent, is that we are out of hope, and we know it. No! to all false consolation, we say. No! to the empty, contrived merriment of a terminal world. Our hope must be

¹ Straight, Anna Pinckney (Portable Snack, 2008, Kansas City). I am grateful to Anna for her pastoral take on this text which has shaped my preaching here.

in someone out there who comes to us. We find our way only because [this] One [who is Jesus the Christ] comes, takes our hand, and leads us home.”²

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I will tell you that as I thought about preaching to you today, I was a little nervous. No one wants to be perceived as throwing a wet blanket on the joy of the Christmas season. We are about to have/just had the Children’s Christmas Pageant, for heaven’s sake! All of us sense the tremendous pressure to present a happy face at this time of year – and this preacher felt it, too.

Why not just gloss over what is really going on in our lives and focus on the positive? Why this talk of pain and hopelessness and unmet expectation? It is almost Christmas!

True. Yet don’t each of us know the deep satisfaction that comes from finally being honest? Haven’t we all discovered the sense of belonging and connectedness that happens when we share our true hurts?

In Advent, as we prepare ourselves to receive the Christ child – the Word made flesh – perhaps this is the best time to acknowledge how much we depend on the mercy of God to bear us up and bind us up. Perhaps this is the best time to acknowledge the fact that we are not always okay. After all, it is almost Christmas. We cannot appreciate the saving mystery of God’s incarnation if we pretend we don’t need saving. Our brokenness is the reason why God chose to enter the world at all.

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Let me tell you about the people who first heard today’s scripture. They were a group who had been exiled – run out of town, out of the place that they had been promised by God; a place called Zion. For generations they were spread over the region – with nothing to hold onto except the promise that, eventually, God would be faithful and restore them to their land.

In this part of Isaiah, the exiles do return – but they return to “a homeland and a temple in ruins. The home they expected turns out to be a place filled with disappointment, disillusionment, and division.”³

It is to these people that Isaiah’s words come: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted...to provide for those who mourn in Zion –
to give them garland instead of ashes,

² Willamon, William. (Going Against the Stream, The Christian Century, December 19-26, 1984) as cited in Rev. Straight’s paper.

³ Jarvis, Cythia (*Feasting on the Word*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds) p. 52.

the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

The foundation of joy is hope, and for the people who heard this good news – their hope was not found in pretending that everything was okay...they were well-beyond the time when they could live that lie. Instead, their hope was found in trusting that God would make well that which was broken.

This passage from Isaiah is specific about the kinds of people to whom God comes: the brokenhearted, the oppressed, the prisoner, those who mourn. It is to these that the Spirit of God comes and transforms their mourning into gladness; their faint spirits into a mantle of praise. Not in a Hallmark kind of way – not through magic that takes away the memory of the hurt or the pain – but in a holy fashion...a kind of holy compassion...that acknowledges the hurt and bears it up with eyes focused on a future that is full of promise and salvation.

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This passage from Isaiah is echoed in New Testament. The gospel writer Luke tells us that in his first sermon, the One for whom we wait sat down in the temple and opened the scroll of Isaiah to the passage that we have heard today. Jesus looked out at a people he had come to save and read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed...”

And when he finished reading this passage he said “today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

In Jesus, God entered into the world of our brokenness not to assure that everything was okay, but to assure that God would be with us.

With us in all of our broken places –
and also ahead of us where all will be well.

It is this hope that is the source of our joy as we lead up to Christmas.

A joy that is unencumbered by the forced merriment of the season.
A joy that is unhitched from the wagon of having it all together.
Unleashed from our need to pretend that everything is okay.

Our joy stems from being able to relinquish ourselves from the burden of generating hope – and surrendering ourselves to the truth that we know: That “[o]ur hope must be in someone out there who comes to us. And that we find our way only because [this] One [who is Jesus the Christ] comes, and takes our hand, and leads us home.”

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I have a friend named Steve who signs off on every one of his emails with this word: “joyfully.”

That may sound nice – in fact, it may almost kind of cheesy.
But that’s what he does on every email...

He ends it: “joyfully, Steve”

Now it’s one thing to write a note to a friend or a family member – maybe thanking them for an act of kindness – and then sign: “joyfully...Steve”

Yet, think about what it must be like if Steve was your boss – and he emailed you about a sub-par performance review:

“We are at a place where we will need to see some improvement in your work-ethic. We will revisit this conversation in three weeks. Joyfully, Steve.”

Or think about how it would sound if you were on the board of an organization and hearing about an underwhelming financial report:

“Contributions to the annual fund have declined slightly this year, and this news is compounded by the fact that our endowment has also lost value. Joyfully, Steve.”

My friend Steve preached in this pulpit in February, earlier this year. Steve served as the President of Columbia Theological Seminary.

A little over three months after he preached at our church, I received an email that let me know my friend had been diagnosed with metastatic pancreatic cancer. After relaying the news, and asking for prayers and support, the email ended how you thought it might...

“joyfully, Steve.”

Since his diagnosis, Steve has shared his journey by blogging on a CaringBridge site. Even as his health deteriorates, he continues to model what it means to live by God’s grace.

Two weeks ago, he wrote about what it means for him to be living in this Advent season that he and his doctors didn’t believe he would see:

“This final season of my life is all about waiting. It is not a waiting that I want to hurry along. But neither is it a waiting which is without hope. I am definitely not eager to die, nor am I eager to move into that stage of this process which includes more health challenges. But I also know that at the end of this waiting there will be peace of a sort that we cannot even imagine this side of eternity.

Waiting is a kind of tension and is hardly ever comfortable. We wait for friends, for phone calls, for medical reports, and bills to be paid. We wait for things to begin; and we wait for things to end. Some wait for a husband or a wife, or perhaps for a child. We wait for reconciliation, for healing, for justice--for circumstances to

change, and indeed for change in our own lives. We wait for someone to notice us, or for someone to love us.

There is a pull between what is and what is to come. It is a tension which cannot be resolved. So instead, my choice is simply to watch with gratitude. I am thankful for today and for all that comes with it. I try to be grateful, rather than impatient, in those waiting rooms. I am grateful for every day that I still have energy and the strength for more activity. And I am thankful that there is a tomorrow which includes a glorious hope. In between, I am thankful for what I am learning and how I continue to grow...

What seems to be important now, as it has been throughout my illness, is that I keep my eyes on those things which remind me of eternity. There are loving relationships, for example, which call me back. And there is the centrality of joy, gratitude and service to be considered every day.. All of these qualities keep my heart facing eternity rather than wallowing in inward confusion. It is the eternal focus that keeps me steady. Love embraces me. Joy uplifts me. Gratitude settles me. Service focuses me away from myself and back on the lives of others. When I lean into love, joy, gratitude and service, I worry less, because eternity surrounds me and God's grace upholds me.

What does the inconsistency in my health mean in light of an eternity which is already assured? Ultimately day to day inconsistency means little when I live with my hand firmly held by the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever."

Do you see the hope within this testimony? It is not a hope everyone can grasp. It is the hope of love eternal – a love found in the Word made Flesh who entered into the brokenness of this world for the sake of binding us up and calling us home.

It is this kind of hope that is the foundation of true joy – a joy not of this world, but of God's coming kingdom.

And so this Advent season we pray: Come Lord Jesus. Come soon.

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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.