

Announcing Joy, Making Joy

Sermon: Year B, Advent 3

Texts: Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11, John 1:6–8, 19–28, I Thessalonians 5:16–24

Preached: December 17, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace and joy to you from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

It was a cold, damp January Saturday in Washington, DC. I was the vicar at Luther Place Memorial Church there, doing my parish internship. We had learned that the homeless women in the neighborhood—and there were many of them—had no place to get any breakfast on Saturdays. None of the agencies that offered that meal Monday through Friday were open on Saturdays, leaving the women with nowhere to eat, nowhere to come in and get warm. And so a group of us in the congregation decided to start hosting a breakfast for the women, followed by a time of quiet, contemplative worship and Eucharist. The ladies would start lining up outside a half hour before we were even ready for them, and when we opened the doors, they would press in and surround the tables set up in the chapel, where we served them what food we had—mostly sweet rolls and fruit. Cold hands would gratefully grasp a cup of hot coffee or hot chocolate, and cold bodies would sink into the chairs in the chapel, reluctant to shed coats and hats even though it was quite warm in the room. As we ate together, those of us from Luther Place would spread out through the room, joining in conversation with those women who were interested in conversing.

There was one elderly African-American woman who was there single week. I'll call her Evelyn. She was frail, wrapped in layer upon layer of filthy clothes, and the odor rising from that clothing would literally make your eyes water. She had a little rolling suitcase crammed with all of her earthly belongings, and she never let it get away from her, even for a moment. There was not a tooth in her head, and she could eat only the softest of foods, crumbs from the sweet rolls dropping from her mouth as she ate. Some of the other women were very protective of her, and called her "Mama." They made sure she got a plate of food, made sure she got a comfortable seat, would brush the crumbs off her. And here's what makes me remember her best: Every single time I spoke to her and asked her how she was doing, Evelyn would smile a big toothless smile, and she would say, "Oh, pastor, I'm fine, fine... God is good! I just thank him every day. I got the *joy* down in my heart! Ain't nothin' can take that away from me."

Here was a woman who literally had no place to lay her head, who had nothing but the clothes on her back, who had not a penny to her name, who depended on strangers even to have food to eat, who shivered in the cold every winter day and sweltered in the DC heat every summer day under those layers of rags, and yet even in those circumstances, she could talk of thankfulness and yes, even of joy. It left me shaking my head in wonder. As Mary said to the Angel Gabriel, "How can this be?"

Now, you might say that religion was being used to keep this woman subjugated, that she had been trained to just be quiet and accept what was happening to her as her lot in life, that she had been told that that was what she was supposed to say. A critic might say that she had been pacified by promises of everything being set right in heaven, in the sweet by and by. But you know, there was a genuineness to that smile, an authenticity to that affirmation of thankfulness and joy, that could not be counterfeited. She meant it. There was in that woman something that shone through the darkness of her days, and that something was joy, a joy that was centered in something that was beyond her circumstances. I think we often make the mistake of confusing "joy" and "happiness." Evelyn had discovered that joy can be found even in suffering, peace can be realized even in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty.

But here's where we have to be careful. See, there's a great temptation at this point to say, "Well, she's got joy, she has her hope of heaven, so all is well." And for many Christians, that's where it stops. We try to spiritualize the message of freedom. "She knows Jesus' love, and is content, so there's nothing more to be done. She has found freedom in Christ." But then we hear those words of Isaiah: "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 liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners... to comfort all who mourn..." Those very same words are echoed in Jesus' words in the synagogue at Capernaum in the Gospel of Luke as he began his public ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor."

The freedom that Isaiah and Jesus proclaim is *not* purely spiritual in nature. It is also very earthly, very much concerned with the actual physical liberation of those who suffer, with shining a light on those who wander in the darkness of oppression, of hunger and poverty, of disease and handicaps—and not just shining a light of hope, but of actually doing something to set things right, doing something to bring about wholeness, doing something to give them a reason for thankfulness and rejoicing. Jesus went about healing and feeding, lifting people up from their circumstances. He did not simply tell them to be happy about heaven.

The word that these passages use to describe the release and liberty of captives is the word that is used back in the book of Leviticus to describe the Jubilee year, a year that is commanded to be observed every 50 years. In the Jubilee year, all those who are enslaved or serving as indentured servants are to be given their freedom. It is a year in which all debts are to be erased, a time in which any property that has been offered up as collateral for debts is to be returned to its owner. It's a time of setting right of relationships, a time for reordering the economic system, and all of this in order to bring about justice, the justice that marks God's reign. It's a time for knocking down things as they are to make way for things as they shall be, making a straight highway in the desert for the just and loving reign of our God.

And sisters and brothers, if ever there was a need for a jubilee year in our own society, it is now. It was announced recently that the richest 400 individuals in our society hold more wealth than the bottom 64% of the population, and three individuals own more than the entire bottom half. Those 400 individuals hold \$2.68 trillion dollars, more than the GDP of Great Britain, the fifth largest economy in the world. The wealth gap between white and black households has become a chasm, with white households holding a median wealth of \$138,200, and black households holding only \$17,800, according to the Federal Reserve. Forbes estimates that if current trends continue, it will take 228 years for the average black family to attain the wealth that white families have today. We see children in our own city who have little or no food to eat on weekends when they don't have school lunches to fill their stomachs—and we see the school nutrition program taking yet another hit while huge tax breaks are being offered to the wealthy and corporations. We see mass shooting after mass shooting, and guns proliferating all around us, while nothing is done to change the situation. We see homeless folks with no hope of finding permanent shelter, and limited options for finding a warm place to get in from the cold, some of them sitting in the park just across the street from our front doors here at Immanuel. The landscape around us is littered with ruins. How long, O Lord, how long?

And then we hear the words of the prophet: “They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display God's glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.” Sisters and brothers, that's what you and I are being called to do. We are called to build up the ancient ruins, to repair the devastation of our ruined cities. And in doing so, that is where we will find our own blessing and joy. The prophet makes the link between the love of justice and the hatred of robbery from the poor and wrongdoing, and rejoicing in the LORD. “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....” Righteousness requires caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien residing in our land. That is how righteousness is defined in scripture. Righteousness is not only a pure heart. Righteousness is also establishing justice, repairing that which is broken, and setting right of relationships, and it is serving others. And that is where our joy can be found.

We can't be content with making sure people know about the joy of God's love. We are called to demonstrate that love with our very lives. We are called to be thankful in every circumstance...but that does not mean that we can be content for others to remain in circumstances that enslave and disempower them, circumstances that cause them to suffer. The vision of Isaiah, the call of Jesus, the joy of the LORD, is found in seeing the world as it shall be, the “year of the LORD's favor.” Our joy, our wholeness, is found most fully when we respond with thankful and generous hearts to proclaim not only spiritual freedom for those who are oppressed and bound, but very real, very earthly, very physical freedom and liberty as well. It is great good news that Jesus, the Anointed One, comes to proclaim, and he invites us into those acts of liberation, those acts of rebuilding, those acts of setting things right, those acts of selfless giving, so that everyone may know God's deep joy, not only in eternity, but here and now, as well. So, how will you be involved in the rebuilding? On this “Joy” Sunday, how will you contribute to joy for those who wait in darkness? Thanks be to God. AMEN