

“A DIFFERENT KIND OF JOY”

Rev. Dr. Floyd Churn

December 13, 2009

Scriptures: Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

Sometimes you just can't keep the joy contained, no matter how hard you try. It was a late October afternoon, either overcast or just starting to get dark, I recall, as I drove onto the Princeton Seminary campus to pick up Janet from her work. In those seminary years, she worked in an office in the seminary chapel as the secretary to the Director of Music and the Professor of Preaching, whose offices were on either side of hers. I had done this pick-up countless times, but this day was unique because that afternoon she had had a doctor's appointment and was to find out whether the stirrings and changes she thought she was feeling in her body might mean that a new life was on the way. I had been tied up with something that afternoon and couldn't get to a phone (if only someone would invent a little phone you could carry around with you all the time!)

So I would be getting the news – uplift or letdown – in person, at work day's end. Naturally I was scanning for clues as Janet emerged from the chapel and made her way toward the car. I saw a rather somber, serious face and began preparing for the news that this was just not the time - and that would be OK...Disappointing but OK. And just then her mouth began to curl slightly at the edges, her facial muscles could just no longer abet her little momentary masquerade, and I saw from her face of laughing joy that, God willing, we would soon be first-time parents. Amid the agonies and ecstasies and everyday ordinariness, a little joy breaks through to point us to a greater joy to come. Sometimes you just can't keep that joy contained no matter how hard you try.

Advent is really a serious and somber season – a little Lent – though many if not most choose *not* to celebrate it as it was originally intended. It is a penitential season, four weeks of repenting and turning around and casting away any and every thing that would capture our hearts and harden us to receiving afresh the real gift of Christmas: God among us as one of us - Emmanuel. Purple is the official liturgical color of Advent, just like the six weeks of Lent, another season for preparing and awakening the heart. But we seem unable to make it all the way through Advent without letting our mouths curl and our face break into a smile, because we know that through all the seriousness and spiritual preparation, through all the bleak circumstances in the nation and world, through all the madness and the melancholy of the season – what we're waiting and preparing for is a baby who will come to change our lives forever...just as the coming of all little babies changes our lives forever. We have to take a Sunday to let the joy of anticipation escape, to unlock our hearts and maybe dance a little dance of delight, a foretaste of good news of great joy to come to all the people, including our somber, over-stretched lives. Today is traditionally known as *Gaudete Sunday* on the liturgical calendar, the Sundays named after the first Latin word of the epistle of the day, today, Philippians 4:4 – “Rejoice! *Gaudete!*” And so we light a pink or rose candle to symbolize a break-in of joy amid our purple preparations. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice...”

But wait – this joy is a different kind of joy, some might say, a strange sort of joy; it’s a “joy in the Lord,” which makes it quite different from happiness. One of the inalienable rights guaranteed in our Declaration of Independence is “the pursuit of happiness” (along with life and liberty) you can pursue happiness, but Advent joy is something you wait for, you long for. It comes to you, you do not chase after it; it is the by-product of a greater gift.

It comes in strange forms – how about John the Baptizer, a figure that most of us would hardly associate with joy and without whom we could very well get through Advent, thank you. But here he is again, the lectionary insists, on this 3rd Sunday of Advent, this *Gaudete* Sunday of all things! You won’t find him out there in the secular Christmas season. You aren’t likely to see a decorated department store window or a Macy’s float on Thanksgiving with wild man John dressed in camel skins and eating locusts and honey, and ushering in the season with his unique version of “Season’s Greetings”: “You brood of vipers!” Advent preachers are best advised not to emulate John in welcoming folks to worship on *Gaudete* Sunday, or anytime – or if they do, to definitely keep the engine running outside! John and joy seem to share nothing in common save the first two letters of each. But if we jump to the last line of our Gospel text today, a brief summary of John the Baptizer’s ministry, we read, “With many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people” Whoa! Is there some joy buried in that good news...joy that grows out of that sense of longing? Barbara A. Holmes argues that at the heart of understanding of joy in the African American worship experience is not unrestrained frivolity, but a deep longing, a longing that challenges and defies expression... a joy experienced as an “unspeakable joy.”¹ People come out to see John, despite his hard, harsh message about repenting and bearing fruit *or else*, because they long for something that is missing from their lives, a joy deeper than happiness, and more lasting. Why would you come out to be baptized, be called sons of vipers, and hear strong words about the need to repent, to totally change, if you were quite self-satisfied and there were no deep longing in your soul? How can this be *good* news?

To repent means literally to turn around, to face a different spiritual compass point, to begin a new journey toward wholeness in a new direction. In the words of that delightful Shaker hymn, “Simple Gifts,” “’Tis the gift to be simple, ’tis the gift to be free, ’tis the gift to come round where we ought to be,” and then “to turn, turn will be our delight, till by turning, turning, we come round right.” There is a joy, a delight in being rightly aligned, aligned with God’s purpose and priorities, a longing to be in tune with God’s music, to change the metaphor a bit. Joy is a by-product of this “coming round right,” not a goal to be pursued.

It was the peoples’ longing in the days of John and Jesus, and it’s the deepest longing of our friends and neighbors and ourselves today. Why is the Christmas season for so many so unsatisfying, so spiritually exhausting, so anxiety-feeding? People caught up in the buying frenzy, worrying whether they’ve gotten this one just the right gift...anxious as to how those family gatherings are going to turn out (“You know Uncle Bill”)...fretting over whether this year they’ll be able to pull off that elusive perfect Christmas. And then - December 26...it’s all over but the present returns and the worry as how we’re ever going to pay for all this stuff we’ve put on the plastic. Could all of the misery side of the season that so many experience be because one is pursuing happiness rather than receiving joy...charging ahead pell-mell rather than “turning round right”?

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice...Let your gentleness be known to everyone...Do not worry about anything...and the peace of God will guard your hearts.”

True joy is living rightly aligned with God and freed from those encumbrances that would keep us misaligned. They have to go. John speaks about the One to come, greater than he, one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit...and – whoops! - fire! Who will clear the threshing floor and with his winnowing fork gather the wheat into the granary but burn the chaff with fire. Does that sound like Advent joy? Well, it begins to sound something like the refiner’s fire Nancy keyed upon last Sunday. What if the wheat and chaff are not the good people (saved!) and the evil people (zapped!), but the more God-like part of us (saved) and the “worth-less” parts of us that need to be burned away (zapped)? Somewhere within there is, I believe, a great longing to be the “finest wheat” God created us to be, the person more reflective of God’s image and less of the burdensome, encumbering aspects of the secular culture – the chaff. I should think an unattainable joy would come upon such a one...unattainable because it is gift, not pursuit, and received simply be “turning round right.”

Then there’s always the practical question. ‘All right, John, then what should we do?’ The unattainable gift calls forth the desire to respond gratefully and practically. What might this correctly realigned life look like? And here John avoids any flights of theological abstraction; this life turned round right consists of rather simple things like generosity...honesty... fairness... justice...gentleness. There are the longing crowds, and to them John says, “If you have two coats, share with someone who has none.” There are the despised tax collectors, also longing for something more; maybe the crowds hoping these traitors working for the enemy would really get raked over the coals by John, but instead – “Be honest...don’t collect any more than is owed.” And there are soldiers who have come out of longing to see John, Roman legions, the enemy himself; surely John will have impossibly harsh “comeuppance” requirements for them: No - “Don’t use your power to bully, no extorting money or threatening with false accusations. Be satisfied with what you have.” Be generous...be just...be honest...be kind. Simple prescriptions for leading a life of deep joy, in tune with God’s intent for all.

That’s the joy of Advent that breaks through. These in-breakings of joy culminate in a birth of the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. We rejoice - and God rejoices with us: “God will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love, he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.” This is the God the prophet Zephaniah knows, the same God the prophet John, the last of the prophets, knows, who delights in the joy of our finding out true home. Imagine! - a God singing his heart out because one of his children has found his or her true self, a God rejoicing with us at the impending birth of his Son, our Lord, God-with-us, as well as at the impending birth of any new life on the way to being born. So no wonder we need to light a rose candle today; it is *Gaudete* Sunday and a birth is in our future. And no wonder we can’t slog through the human drama we’re in with totally expressionless faces. As though there were nothing great to anticipate. We can try, but more likely, our mouth will begin to curl slightly at the edges and joy will break out on our face, even if only briefly, because, after all, a child is going to be born to us. Amen.

ⁱ As quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume I* (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2009), p. 64.