

“How Great Our Joy?” – Stephanie Wing, 12.13.09

This third Sunday of Advent is often the one on which we celebrate joy.

The Christmas season itself is often called the Season of Joy. Perhaps more than any other time of year, joy is on our lips and on the radio waves. So, in this season of joy, how great is our joy?

Last week the Thoughtful Christian Sunday School class discussed "Reclaiming Christmas," and the lesson included a top ten list of things wrong with Christmas. Here it is:

1. Feeling disappointed—again—by the season
2. Hours spent searching for *the* present for kids or grandkids
3. Having to decorate to keep up with the neighbors
4. Feeling alone or alienated
5. Conflicts with the family
6. Insane travel schedules
7. Credit card bills through next Christmas
8. Feeling like you have to give something or you're a bad person
9. Not enough peace and joy
10. A loss of the sense of the miraculous <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Reclaiming Christmas: Seeking an Alternative,” by Greg Garrett, copyright 2007, [www.thethoughtfulchristian.com](http://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com).

Perhaps you can relate to one or more of these items. This is a good, though not necessarily comprehensive, list of common reasons why the holidays end up being anything BUT the season of joy that our Christmas carols, cards, and everything else seem to promise.

This past year has seen many losses in our church family, and many will be facing the holidays for the first time without parents, partners, or friends. While we celebrate the promise of resurrection, there is also real grief and loss, often heightened by the disruption in traditions that have been celebrated for many years. The recession brings a different set of losses that we also grieve. Other losses or life changes can make this season a bit more difficult. At the end of a calendar year, it can be the year in review that leaves us flat, with January 1<sup>st</sup> hopes deflated by December realities. Sometimes all it takes is the overwhelming crush of activity to sap our joy.

Christmas, more than any other time of year, is the season in which we are told from every angle that we should be joyful. We go through the motions every year. Maybe if we look busy, we'll look joyful too?

Our nation was built on the principal that we all have an inalienable right to pursue happiness. And we've been busy pursuing ever since. At Christmas we pursue happiness in gift giving and receiving, in baking and eating, in shopping and decorating and on and on and on! There is an abundance of abundance. We

eat too much, we spend too much, and we try to cram too much into our already-busy lives. Often the thing that seems to be the most absent is an abundance of joy. Everything else tends to crowd it out.

At first glance, our texts today might seem to be texts of cheer leading or empty encouragement. Sing aloud! Don't worry! And most of all, rejoice! Easier said than done. But that isn't the case at all. As a prophet, Zephaniah was delivering a message that no one wanted to hear to a people who were oppressed and struggling, fighting for their survival on all fronts. To make matters worse, Zephaniah comes and delivers a message of judgment and destruction! Then after that message, he provides some words of assurance. Sing, O daughter Zion! Rejoice and exult with all your heart!

Similarly, Paul writes to the church in Philippi and tells them to rejoice, and not to worry about anything. Paul himself was writing from Prison. The church in Philippi was experiencing major problems. They were facing conflict and persecution from their non-Christian neighbors. There was a rival faction of Christians claiming a different truth. And even within their own community, two prominent leaders were fighting with one another.

The Philippian church was the first European church established by Paul, and there was great affection between Paul and the Christians in Philippi. He hadn't been with them for some time, and as they were struggling to be church,

they faced growing discouragement as they were persecuted, as there were tensions within their own community, and as they heard about the imprisonment of their beloved teacher and pastor. Finally they receive a letter from him, and in it he tells them to rejoice! And, just in case anyone missed it the first time, he says again, rejoice!

The words from Scripture that call us to rejoice are far from empty encouragement. They are not Pollyanna-ish statements. They are words spoken in contexts filled with trial, persecution, and suffering of various kinds. Both speak to the power of the truth of an incarnational God - God made flesh, with us. Both assure us that the Lord is here, and God is near. God has already come in the person of Jesus Christ, our Savior. The world has been redeemed through Christ.

But we still live in a world that is characterized more by brokenness than by the breaking-in of God. But the assurance that we have is that God is breaking in. God is breaking into our broken world, redeeming it and redeeming us with a love that is utterly incomprehensible. Incomprehensible love – the phrase itself is impossible to conceptualize! We don't often know how to deal with that which we cannot comprehend, rationalize, and analyze.

The fact is, in our world, joy doesn't make much sense. Pollyannas and optimists everywhere are criticized for closing their eyes to the harsh realities

surrounding us all. Looking at all of the pain, and suffering, and loss in this world, what do we have to be joyful about? It doesn't make sense.

But that's the thing about joy. It comes when we are least expecting it. We pursue happiness, but joy pursues us. Certainly we experience moments of pure joy when all is well: at the birth of a child, at the marriage of two soul-mates, or surrounded by the love of family and friends. But the difference between Christian joy and regular happiness is that even in the depths of our greatest miseries, joy cannot be extinguished. That's because joy doesn't depend on us, or on our circumstances. It comes as pure gift from God. And often it comes in the times and places when we least expect it.

Joy comes to an unwed teenage mother of the humblest circumstances. Joy comes to Paul and Silas, bound in prison, who can't stop singing. Joy comes to a mother who has not only lost her son, but who stood by his side as he was unfairly tried and brutally executed. Joy comes with the dawn of Easter Sunday after the dark reality of crucifixion and death.

Joy can still come to us today. Joy comes to us in the gathered community, where we are reminded that we are not alone, that God is with us. Joy comes in tears we didn't know we were holding back, in the press of a supportive hand, in a phrase of music, a word of Scripture, and the gurgling of a baby in church. Joy comes in a smile from a stranger, a random kindness, the rain on the windowpane

reminding us of the waters of baptism. Joy comes in silence and it comes in exuberant sounds of praise; joy comes in all of the ways that God speaks to us, saying, "I am here."

Joy comes to us when we give thanks and worship God, when we look beyond ourselves and can once again be astounded by the God of the Universe who wants nothing more than relationship with us. Joy can come when we give up the pursuit of happiness; when we let go of the busy-ness that keeps us in constant pursuit. Joy can come when we stop worrying about all of the details, when we let go of the reins and give everything to God in prayer and supplication. Joy comes when we put down the burdens that we work so hard to carry on our own, and find that our empty hands are now free to receive the peace, hope, love, and joy of the Holy Spirit. Joy comes when we give ourselves fully to the wonder of the God who created us, who loves us so much, and who wants nothing more than to hold us close, to empty himself and give all that he has - his very life - just for us. Are we ready to receive the gift?