

"Who's Who?"

Isa. 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps. 126; John 1:6-8, 19-28
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
Advent 3, December 14, 2008

Today is joy Sunday! Known for hundreds of years by the Latin word **gaudete**. That's how the ancient liturgy of the church for this Sunday began - with the word: rejoice!

Here in the middle of advent, two of our scriptures for the morning break away and go for a joy ride. Words of judgment and repentance recede into the background as we pick up speed toward Christmas. The wind blows through our hair and we experience the exhilaration of salvation through Christ.

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Joy is a peculiar. It is a Christmas card word, a Christmas carol word.

It is often confused with excitement, pleasure, fun or happiness. But it isn't like these at all, except in one respect:

C.S. Lewis said that **joy** has one thing in common with these others: once we taste any of them, we hunger for more.

Once we are touched by joy we yearn to experience it again and again.

But otherwise, joy doesn't have much in common with excitement, or pleasure, or fun. They depend on **positive** conditions: good health, happy family, good job, lots of toys. Here in the United States we are given the "right" to pursue happiness.

The **peculiar** thing about joy is it pursues us. It is out of our control, out of our hands. It often surprises us. It bubbles up to the surface at times when it is unexpected, unlooked for.

Our texts for today, from Zephaniah, Isaiah and Paul overflow with joy and rejoicing. **But** even the most superficial examination of their lives would tell us that they had much more reason to be downcast than upbeat.

Zephaniah and Isaiah are prophets of judgment and doom. Zephaniah in particular rails against a religious culture that has forgotten its roots in the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He foretells the destruction and exile.

His words were shocking, impossible to believe. Who could imagine the destruction of Jerusalem? It was the place in which God was present in the midst of the people.

His message of hope and renewal is totally unexpected. But it is filled with a promise that gives his people something to sing about after exile has become a reality.

It is an interesting scene for an Advent Sunday. The wonderful pageant we enjoyed last week hop-scotched over today's texts with its telling of the Christmas story and the angels and shepherds and wise men and all.

Today's texts speak of a man named John. As the story from the gospel unfolds we quickly see that identity is key. A delegation from Jerusalem has arrived at the riverside to question this man who has been creating quite a stir with his baptisms and his preaching.

They want to know who he is. John, the gospel writer, has already told us about this other John. He is a witness to the light of the World. His role is to help others see and believe in Jesus Christ as God's son and our savior.

This is John's job. He is to testify to the light.

I daresay this is our job too. We are called to testify to the light. Not by saying to others that they must believe or they are going to hell. Not by being snobbish or insistent or arrogant or rude. No. We are called to point out the light of life that has come into the world and to show by the way we live and act and interact with others that the life of God in Jesus Christ has made a difference in our lives.

The presence of Jesus has made a difference in John's life. So much so, that this delegation from Jerusalem wonders whether he might even be the Messiah himself, the One from God who has come into the world.

John quickly puts those questions to rest. He begins by stating negatives. "I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not even the prophet (a resurrected Moses, perhaps?)."

How many of us, when others ask who we are, begin with a list of negatives? "I am not a scientist. I am not an athlete. I am not an accountant..."

In John's case it was a little different. With such a heightened level of expectation and anticipation that something was bound to happen and SOON, it was easy to blur the lines between the messenger and the Messiah, between one who has a key role in the unfolding drama and the one who is the central figure of the drama.

But John is like that. He stands off to the side and points. He resists the urge to take center stage even though, in spite of his denials, even Jesus will equate him with Elijah who was to appear before the Messiah's arrival.

Still, even when he gets around to stating who he is he borrows ancient words from Isaiah, comparing himself to the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

And there is a certain measure of joy in knowing who we are and who we are not.

John knew who he was and he was content to play that part.

THE APOSTLE PAUL IS WRITING TO THE PHILIPPIANS FROM HIS **PRISON CELL**. HIS FUTURE IS VERY MUCH IN DOUBT. WHETHER HE WILL LIVE OR DIE IS AN OPEN QUESTION.

NEVERTHELESS, EVEN IN HIS IMPRISONMENT, HE CALLS FOR REJOICING AS A PATTERN OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. "REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS, AND AGAIN I SAY REJOICE."

PAUL IS THE GREAT AMBASSADOR FOR **JOY** IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING. HIS JOY WAS CENTERED IN THE CROSS AND THE REALITY OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS. IT DIDN'T DEPEND ON HOW HE **FELT** AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT OR ON WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO HIM. IT WAS INDESTRUCTIBLE.

PERHAPS YOU TOO HAVE EXPERIENCED THE JOY THAT JUST COMES BUBBLING UP FROM SOME HIDDEN WELL DEEP WITHIN YOU.

IT CAN EVEN BE EMBARRASSING.

IN THE FACE OF THE DESTRUCTION AROUND US --- DESTROYED HOPES, DESTROYED DREAMS, DESTROYED LIVES,-- **JOY** SEEMS ALMOST IRREVERENT. WE CAN LOOK AT SO MANY THINGS THAT AREN'T RIGHT, SO MANY THINGS THAT ARE FILLED WITH VIOLENCE, SUFFERING AND DEATH.

BUT, AS WITH ZEPHANIAH, ISAIAH, AND PAUL, SO TOO WITH US, OUR JOY ISN'T BASED ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF OUR LIVES OR IN OUR WORLD. THE ONLY CONDITION FOR JOY IS THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

JOY HAPPENS WHEN GOD IS PRESENT AND PEOPLE KNOW IT. IT CAN ERUPT IN THE MIDST OF AN INTENSIVE CARE WAITING ROOM, OR IN THE MIDDLE OF A WAR.

JONATHAN EDWARDS, THE GREAT PURITAN PREACHER, PROPOSED WAYS TO TELL TRUE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE FROM THE WORK OF CHARLATANS: HE SAID: "**JOY IS A DEAD GIVEAWAY THAT GOD IS PRESENT**".

ZEPHANIAH, ISAIAH AND PAUL SHARE IN COMMON THE JOY THAT COMES FROM THE AWARENESS OF GOD'S PRESENCE. **ISAIAH** SAYS: "SHOUT ALOUD AND SING FOR JOY, O ROYAL ZION, FOR GREAT IN YOUR MIDST IS THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL"

ZEPHANIAH SINGS OUT: “THE LORD, YOUR GOD, IS IN YOUR MIDST”.
PAUL EXCLAIMS: “THE LORD IS AT HAND.”

IN OUR MIDST, NEAR AT HAND... NOT FAR OFF, BUT CLOSE ENOUGH
TO TOUCH, TO SEE, TO EXPERIENCE FIRSTHAND.

NOT HIDDEN IN OUR PAST, BUT LODGED RIGHT HERE IN OUR PRESENT.
NOT TO BE LOOKED FOR ON THAT “GREAT, GETTIN’ UP MORNING”, BUT ALL
AROUND US.

WE HAVE SOMETHING TO SING ABOUT WHEN WE EXPERIENCE THE JOY
THAT ONLY GOD CAN PROVIDE.

IT IS THE JOY THAT FLIES IN THE FACE OF OUR FEARS AND RESIDES IN
THE DIVINE “NEVERTHELESS”.

WE ARE IMPRISONED.....**NEVERTHELESS!** WE WILL PRAISE GOD!
WE ARE SUFFERING...**NEVERTHELESS!** WE COUNT IT ALL JOY.
DEATH HAS COME TO CALL...**NEVERTHELESS!** DEATH WHERE IS
THY STING, GRAVE WHERE IS THY VICTORY?

WHEN THE LORD IS AT HAND, WHEN THE LORD IS IN OUR MIDST WE
EXPERIENCE A JOY THAT CANNOT BE EXPLAINED. NOTHING CAN ACCOUNT
FOR IT. IT JUST IS.

GOD IS HERE, AS THE PSALMIST SAYS : “A VERY PRESENT HELP IN TROUBLE”.

...RIGHT HERE, CLOSE AT HAND, GOD IS IN OUR MIDST WITH A PROMISE TO WIPE
AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM OUR EYES AND TO FILL US WITH A JOY WHICH
CANNOT BE TAKEN AWAY FROM US.