

Joy

December 13, 2009

Richmond United Church

Third Sunday of Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Isaiah 12:2-6

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Luke 1:47-55

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Advent is a time of reflection. But we are not always sure of why we do it. For many it was not part of the Christmas season. I didn't grow up with it, so we sang a lot of Christmas carols. We still have that memory, for we often hear, "Why aren't we singing Christmas carols?" We are like the kids in the back seat on a long trip - "Are we there yet?"

This feeling is very understandable for all around us are reminders of the count down to Christmas - only 11 more shopping days. As well our church history tells us much about our Advent preparation. In the old blue hymn book there were only 2 advent hymns and now in VOICES UNITED we have 34. There is a good rationale for waiting.

It is like waiting for a great party. It is like preparing a great feast. We anticipate and that makes the event sweeter. As we smell the feast cooking we enjoy it even more when we sit down. Thus waiting and preparing have an important function in daily life and special occasions. When we arrive we know why we took the journey.

There is a good feeling in the air around Christmas. Of course, there is the usual conversation about its meaning. Christmas is what it is. God works with Christmas as it is in order to lure it to what it can become.

So we don't complain about it, fight it, avoid it or protest against it. Instead we try to go with the flow in a spirit of acceptance looking for signs of God's grace in unexpected places and spending our energy in practicing spiritual gifts and practices of Advent - hope, peace, joy and love.

Our job as Christians is to help ourselves and others discern the light of Christ coming into the world again and for all of us. Our 'lure' is to help ourselves and others discern where that light appears for us in the cracks - the messes and mistakes.

The spiritual practice of discernment helps us honour our best intentions about gift-giving without getting caught up in consumerism and commercialism or becoming killjoys about excessiveness.

This is why Advent is so important. We wait for Christmas as a way of strengthening our spiritual muscles, so we will be prepared for tough times, times of doubt, times when God seems absent or

occupied elsewhere. Advent is the discipline of waiting and preparation. We prepare our spirits to receive Christ's presence in our lives.

This Advent Sunday is the third spiritual gift and discipline of our journey through Advent. Joy. Joy is inner directed. Joy is a spiritual condition. It is a spiritual gift that requires disciplined, regular, spiritual work - the work of study, prayer and the practice of discernment - in order to welcome it in and make a home for it.

Joy has about it a kind of serenity, deep pleasure, satisfaction in the sense of fulfillment and contentment, delight and bliss. No wimpy adjectives here. Joy is not dependent on external circumstances. Joy is about deep confidence in the presence of God in our lives and in the world.

Joy is a product of a spiritual state that wells up from within us and which is still there for us to experience and draw strength from, even on our worst days. Just as waiting becomes yearning, so happiness turns to its deep, spiritual counterpart - joy

Mary offers some hints in the reading from Luke. The Song of Mary is an ancient hymn of joy. Mary would be young - about twelve or thirteen years old. She is called a virgin - which means a very young woman who has just reached childbearing age, so is marriageable, but who has not given birth. She has just discovered the worst thing that can happen to a teenaged girl has happened to her. She discovers she is pregnant. And Joseph, her husband-to-be is clear that he is not the father.

Not a great time to sing a song of Joy, yet she does. The first thing Mary does is to sing. Her pondering in her heart ends in a song. It is a song about hope, joy, and love that come with a birth. The singer offers a prayer that she will greet her son with arms of Love. Mary had the grace to be wide open to God's indwelling presence. I am reminded about this wide open love every time I see a child running toward her parent - or in the song Arms Wide Open.

Now this singing is world shaking, for this event is a deep challenge to stratified society where one is to be a good girl or a good boy, and rule keepers. Luke gives us a narrative that challenges all stratified reality. For out of the despised - the dishonourable - the shameless - the useless - comes God's grace.

Beginnings come out of unexpected places and times.

Advent days are days of anticipation and expectation to prepare us for such a birth in our heart. As Mary pondered God's reality, we are called to ponder how God works in our lives. We move slowly to the event that defines us and shapes us. Advent reminds us of the value in taking one's time to arrive at a destination. Instead of hurrying through a banquet, we take our time to relish and taste each flavour of food. We want good things to last, and taking time trains us to make things last. This is why the Advent journey is so important to the Christmas season. It is a time of deep reflection upon what is important in life, and what makes life more enjoyable. It is a building of the melody until we cannot help but shout. God is here!

Another value of Advent is, it teaches us that difficult situations don't evaporate; it doesn't promise that life is without difficulty. Faith does not remove the marks of suffering, but it can transform their meaning. Love feels our pain and transcends it.

Our other lessons are also about songs of hope and joy. There is a note of wild and joyous exuberance in these songs.

Rejoice! Exult! Sing aloud! Shout!
I will bring you home . . . says the Lord

No wonder these phrases get picked up in great liturgical music. It is hard to sit still. Then Isaiah:

Surely God is my salvation! My Strength!

Sing aloud! Sing for Joy! . Mary belts out her song. Joy.

Joy - an orientation toward life that is founded on cultivating the gifts of hope and peace. Joy, an attitude and conviction that says that it is God who has the last word about life. Joy, rooted in the confidence that God is ultimately in charge of the world and of our lives. We can have deep peace and serenity, and even joy, in that knowledge.

As the poet Yeats says, in dangerous times, live with joy. Mary, young and ill equipped to deal with the dangerous times she faced, left us a spiritual treasure - a hymn of joy. Like her, we too live in dangerous times - our deserts - places and times when we are not certain. So we ask God to build a highway through the deserts of our hearts and minds making us holy, wholly belonging to God. This is our spiritual practice of Advent: waiting and expecting the presence of God. And we, like Mary, find Joy.

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