

“Where There is Sadness, JOY!”

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Third Sunday of Advent-December 11, 2011

First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

FIRST READING: Isaiah 61:1-4; 7-11

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 proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his 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. [...]

Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

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, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

SECOND READING: John 1: 6-8; 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. [...]

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Despite some of the buzz of our son John holding a baby asleep on his shoulder during church a few weeks ago, Emma and I are not grandparents.

But I am something that makes me feel even older. I am a great uncle.

I think that title has that effect on me because the only great uncle I can remember in my own life was “Uncle Cal” who lived at the Lincoln Motor Lodge in Fayetteville when I was a kid. And on some Sundays we would all “leave out after church” to have lunch with Uncle Cal and then spend a good part of the afternoon with him. Or, rather, my parents would, while “us kids” roamed around in the David Brown tractor lot behind the motel or went to a drugstore on the square and bought “Big Rock Candy Mountain” candy, courtesy of Uncle Cal's quarter to each of us. Being a great nephew was fun, and the Uncle Cal was great, when it came to generosity. He frankly doted on us.

But Uncle Cal was, in my eyes, also something else. He was unmistakably ancient. Uncle Cal was always immaculately dressed, complete with a tie on every day of the week, and he could have been, to my eyes at least, Father Time himself. He was not Daniel's vision of the “Ancient of Days,” but he defined what it meant to be really, really old—a “Great Uncle.”

And now I am a great uncle. “Great Uncle Robert,” to 3 kids, the same as Uncle Cal. I am only “great” in the technical, relationships sense. I have a lot of work to do on the dotting front. A lot, to catch up with Uncle Cal.

So, I am doubly sad to say that I have never even met one of my three great nephews. I have never seen him, but I do believe he exists. I have heard stories of him. And his name is Thomas.

Thomas is the adopted son of my nephew Timothy and his wife Emily. Thomas was an orphan in Rwanda.

When Timothy and Emily met Thomas, he had never seen or walked on grass. He had never seen a cat or a dog. Thomas never had a consistent language spoken to him, whether Rwandan or French or English. He may have had an “identifier name” in the orphanage, but it was a temporary one at best. Because Thomas really had no identity, no family, no past, no present, no future. From the perspective of the world, Thomas barely existed at all.

And as you might guess, Rwanda itself was no paradise, no Eden, not for anyone, much less a homeless little boy like Thomas. And you might also surmise that the adoption process for Timothy and Emily and Thomas would not be easy. And you would be very right. It was very challenging and very difficult.

But still Timothy and Emily went to Rwanda, and they met this little homeless boy and they claimed him in their hearts as their own. In fact, they did that before they ever left home for Rwanda. They were filled with joy even before they got on the plane.

Once they got to Rwanda, we began to receive e-mails from them that were filled with even more soaring joy as they met and got to know Thomas, whom they named for my own father, Timothy’s grandfather. But the emails were also filled with scary details of just how difficult the adoption process was actually proving to be.

But as the emails progressed, no matter how difficult the particular phase of the process was, the joy that was rising up in Timothy and Emily, and the joy that was rising up in the smiles of a little boy now no longer homeless and now no longer without an identity, were obvious in the pictures we began to see.

Joy began to become tangible, unmistakable. And it progressed and moved forward, despite all the rubble of an almost ruined country, and despite all the language gaps and despite the cost and the time and the fact that Thomas himself was quite sick, very sick as they learned when they got home—despite all that, the initial joy that Timothy and Emily felt, and that Thomas obviously has learned to feel more and more—that initial, long-odds joy has become the story of their lives. So much so that I have no doubt that Timothy and Emily believe that Thomas was meant to be theirs from the day he was born—or before. And I have no doubt that they now believe that one of the biggest reasons they themselves are on this earth is because of that little homeless, hopeless boy they now know as their son, as Thomas, the inseparable brother to their other son, Ty. Whose own joy is higher because a little boy in Rwanda found his home, at long last. Thomas has come home. And joy has spread all around.

I hear echoes of that kind of story in the passage from Isaiah 61. An old story, an old people. By this time the Isaiah messages and tradition are very, very old. From the start of Isaiah 1 before the fall of the northern kingdom to the end of Isaiah 39, when any sign of Israel or Judah as countries is gone. To the return now from exile 40 years later—this is the claiming of a great promise that was old by the time Isaiah 61 was spoken.

Isaiah had said all these things would happen, but for years, the promise of a homecoming for the Jews had to have seemed like a hazy, distant dream at best.

But now, in Isaiah 61, the exiles have come home. And the old prophecy that they would one day come home is on the verge of coming true.

But the scene that met this struggling, straggling group of exiles as they climbed the last hill and could see down in the Jerusalem valley surely could have sent them back home with heads bowed low.

Before them lay not Jerusalem as they had seen it or as the city described by their grandparents. Before them lay a pile of rubble. No temple. No palace. Not a building standing. Not two stones together, except as heaps of rock where jackals lived.

And it would have been easy for their sadness at what they saw—like a shattered Rwanda—to have stolen their hearts away. And people being people, I suspect that a lot of them felt exactly that way.

But among them, perhaps from way in the back, came this voice:

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 proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his 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.

And people being people, I suspect there were some who heard these words and said to themselves, "Are you kidding me? This is hopeless. Do you not see what is plainly in front of you?"

But these words could not be turned back, any more than parents can turn away from their child, no matter how hard it gets, or how difficult the odds or the challenges. In fact, these words claim that at this very moment, when the city lies in ruins and these homeless exiles are standing there with no tangible proof that the city can be rebuilt—that at that very moment, the salvation of the world is beginning again. And at least one human heart, the voice speaking these words, is being filled with joy.

And today, we have lighted a pink candle of joy because of these words, and the impact they had and have continued to have on frail human hearts, like those exiles, like untold numbers of unknown people. For from these homeless people, standing there in on the cold, hard rock rubble of all their history—from them will arise the Messiah whom John the Baptist announces.

The voice of joy, despite all the competing and conflicting voices, prevailed.

And in spite of all the discouraging facts, the city of Jerusalem was indeed rebuilt, including the temple.

The joy of a people having come home was enough in God's mercy to make these words of Isaiah 61 become reality.

And, in Luke 4, these words were spoken by another Voice, by another Another, by the Anointed One, when several centuries later Jesus stood up in the synagogue of Nazareth and announced these very same words to a new generation as the start of a new chapter of salvation—the ultimate salvation of not just a single city or a single people, but of the whole world—despite all the even longer odds, the greater rubble of human sin and faithlessness.

Now ironically this week as I was getting ready for this sermon on joy, I felt my own sadness try to reassert itself more strongly than I have felt it in months.

And I can assure you that it is difficult to face the reality of trying to talk about joy when your own heart is being threatened by a sense of sadness. Let me be clear. This was not grief *per se*. No one close to me died this week, and I suffered no personal loss this week.

But there were some hard words spoken among people I love this week.

And I heard a lot of stories again this week about problems that I don't have a clue how to solve.

And I had moments when I felt that several of the situations facing me and others are just more than we can "realistically" expect to turn out well. And that my own efforts in trying to solve them are going to wind up failing or being useless.

And yet Sunday—the third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of joy, the Sunday with the pink candle—was always edging closer, when these words from Isaiah would be read to all of us, and I would be called upon to stand up to say something about them.

Thankfully, God sent words of joy and love to me through people in my life. And then as I turned to finish the preparation for this very sermon, the words of another ancient document fell in front of me. They were words from a document from the second century AD, from a manuscript called *The Shepherd of Hermas*. And the words read this way:

"Remove from you sadness; for it is the sibling of doubt and anger."

"How, sir," say I, "is it the sibling of these? for anger, doubt, and sadness seem to be

quite different from each other." "You are senseless, O man. Do you not perceive that grief is more wicked than all the spirits, and most terrible to the servants of God, and more than all other spirits destroys man and crushes out the Holy Spirit...?"

Wherefore put on cheerfulness, which always is agreeable and acceptable to God, and rejoice in it. For every cheerful man does what is good, and minds what is good, and despises sadness; but the sorrowful man always acts wickedly.

These words fell on me like a personal John the Baptist, telling me that it was time for me to let go of my small-minded thoughts and to trust the power of joy far more than the power of sadness. The kind of sadness here is not grief that would come at a funeral home or at a death. It is the kind of sadness that comes from feeling that things simply cannot turn out well. Sadness may feel serious-minded and realistic, but it has no power for life in it. And it guarantees, as *Hermas* reminded me, the very thing it fears. This kind of sadness is a trap that holds us down and back for no good reason.

It is the kind of sadness that would have kept parents back from Rwanda, because it was all too impossible to imagine that it could all work out.

It is the kind of sadness that would have sent exiles back into oppression.

It is the kind of sadness that would have caused John the Baptist to quit because people were so hard-hearted, resistant and even hostile.

But John the Baptist didn't back away from the joy and the hope that had risen up in him.

And despite the challenges of coming home, my great nephew Thomas did make it home in joy.

And the temple was rebuilt through the hands of those very exiles come home, by the power of the words of joy that we still read in Isaiah 61 and. And someone among the exiles even wrote a song to put in their own worship book called the psalms:

"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like people who dream..."

That language sounds wonderful—and it is—but in all these stories we hear the note of seeming impossibility. Getting ourselves to believe that God is at work in our lives is harder than building a temple itself.

And Jesus did stand up in the synagogue of Nazareth, and you and I have seen and experienced God's grace and salvation.

And God is intent, Isaiah reminds us, on bringing exiles home.

And God is intent, in every age, on renewing the whole face of the earth, and all the peoples of the earth. Which means that the words spoken over a ruined city are still words we can trust...and as God's people, indeed, as people of the Anointed One, we ourselves are people sent

to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor... to comfort all who mourn; to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

In the very places where hope and peace are most at risk, there we as the church, and as disciples of Jesus, are called to bring good news, to be instruments of God's justice and grace, so that in the very place of sadness, there is joy.

This salvation of God at work in our world, flowing from the power of Jesus Christ, first finds its home, however, in a human heart. God seeks, first of all, for joy rather than discouragement and sadness to fill the human heart. In mine. In yours. In ours. In the hearts of this church.

Dear friends, let the joy that God's Spirit seeks to create in you well up into praise and thanksgiving, into gladness rather than mourning, into freedom rather than the prison of discouragement.

Jerusalem was rebuilt. The words of the prophet were made into reality by the goodness of God.

Jesus has arrived in our world, and the final salvation of God has begun.

You and I have heard the good news. Let us rejoice in it, and let us trust it.

And then let us turn to all the places of sadness, in us and around us, and find "new joy in bringing joy," in being people sent to celebrate and bring good news of a great joy for all people.

Amen.