

“For You Shall Go Out in Joy”

Isaiah 55:6-13

December 16, 2007

Read Isaiah 55:6-13.

Advent is a time of hope. As the people of Israel awaited the fulfillment of God’s promises in the birth of the Christ, as we await Jesus’ coming again, we look around and see things that are not the way they should be. There’s a powerlessness that can be depressing and overwhelming if that is all we see. We hold onto hope and we act in the confidence that God is coming, there is a new heaven and a new earth yet to be seen, and that we have been adopted as children of the King of that kingdom. Advent is a time of hope.

Advent is a time of peace. Being Christians – that is, disciples of Jesus Christ – means that we are following as he “guides our feet in the way of peace.” It is an active following, we are on the move. It is an engaged following as we invite others to, “come, follow Jesus.” It is a faithful following because we know that peace is found only in faith in Jesus Christ.

Advent is a time of joy. The danger about preaching on joy during Advent is that the congregation will react by thinking, “Oh, great; I’m supposed to feel joy. All I feel is the pressure of getting everything done – thanks a lot.” Be joyous! One more thing to add to the list.

This is the time of the year when some of us are accused of being – and some of us have sympathy for – the Grinch.

You know the story by Dr. Suess:

Every Who Down in Who-ville liked Christmas a lot...

But the Grinch, Who lived just North of Who-ville, did NOT!

The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season! Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason. It could be that his head wasn't screwed on quite right. It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight. But I think that the most likely reason of all may have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

But, Whatever the reason, His heart or his shoes, He stood there on Christmas Eve, hating the Whos. Staring down from his cave with a sour, Grinchy frown; at the warm lighted windows below in their town. For he knew every Who down in Who-ville beneath was busy now, hanging a mistleoe wreath.

"And they're hanging their stockings!" he snarled with a sneer. "Tomorrow is Christmas! It's practically here!" Then he growled, with his grinch fingers nervously drumming, "I MUST find a way to keep Christmas from coming!" For, tomorrow, he knew...

...All the Who girls and boys would wake up bright and early. They'd rush for their toys! And then! Oh, the noise! Oh, the noise! Noise! Noise! Noise! That's one thing he hated! The NOISE! NOISE! NOISE! NOISE!

Then the Whos, young and old, would sit down to a feast. And they'd feast! And they'd feast! And they'd FEAST! FEAST! FEAST! FEAST! They would start on Who-pudding, and rare Who-roast-beast which was something the Grinch couldn't stand in the least!

And THEN they'd do something he liked least of all! Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, would stand close together, with Christmas bells ringing. They'd stand hand-in-hand. And the Whos would start singing!

They'd sing! And they'd sing! AND they'd SING! SING! SING! SING! And the more the Grinch thought of the Who-Christmas-Sing, the more the Grinch thought, "I must stop this whole thing! "Why for fifty-three years I've put up with it now! I MUST stop Christmas from coming! ...But HOW?"

There's a man struggling to find some joy. I cannot say I have ever wished that Christmas would not come; I can confidently say that I have wished that Christmas would come sooner! There is the frustration of crowds, of obligations, of trying to cram in happiness into a specific time frame.

In our house, I have established an unpopular rule: no Christmas carols played before Thanksgiving. This sounds like a dictatorial kind of rule, but it comes from a practical consideration. I am physically and spiritually unable to sustain any kind of Christmas spirit for more than several weeks; if it starts before Thanksgiving, I will be done with Christmas before the second week of December.

Why?

Because there is something off about the way we treat Christmas in the United States. The happiness and cheer are not the whole story. Advent and Christmas are not unbridled happiness. Advent songs are generally sung in minor keys because they reflect the hard times and realities of waiting in expectation for God to intervene – to rescue. Among the themes of Isaiah are the complementary words: savior and redeemer.

Isaiah speaks to a people who are living in exile, who will find joy in the hope of their restoration and the re-establishment of the covenant relationship with God. Things are not good for them in the present; Isaiah's description of joy requires them to see beyond their immediate circumstances.

You cannot begin to understand the joy that Isaiah describes unless you first understand the poverty and depression the people were experiencing. They were in exile. They were under the ruling thumb of foreign governments. The temple had been destroyed. We have been spending a

lot of time in this period – some 500 years before Christ – because it is such a critical point in the revelation of God’s purpose for all of humankind.

The Babylonian Empire had fallen and the Mede/Persian Empire had taken over. This word comes to Isaiah as Darius has taken authority. Through Isaiah God promises that Darius, then Cyrus, were his chosen servants who would provide for the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple. He revealed this before it happened. Isaiah revealed that this restoration had come from the LORD’s hand. It was God who was at work, even through the means of using a foreign king as an instrument of his grace. Despite the appearance of their present circumstances, God was revealing his sovereignty and promised that all creation will sing his praise.

Likewise, you cannot begin to understand the joy that the birth of this Christmas child brings unless you understand the futility and hopelessness of trying to restore our relationship with God by ourselves. Without Christ, we lived in captivity to sin. We were in exile from God’s holiness. We were sinners dead in our sin. We deserved the true wages of sin, which is death. The same language God used for Israel can be used for us: we look for a savior, we look for a redeemer.

You see, this is the true joy in Christmas – rescue. It is not a celebration of *our* abundance. Unlike the advertisements, eternal love is *not* expressed in a diamond or other material gift. The Christmas spirit is not a reverie of friendship for the sake of having a party. It is the multiple emotional experience of relief, of unrealized yet expected hope, of a new perspective. Help is on the way. We are not alone. God is with us and we are assured of our hope in him.

“Joy to the world, the LORD is come; let earth receive her king.” It is a favorite carol because it celebrates what God has done for our rescue. Though we only sing the third verse during the Christmas season, it is the crux of what we celebrate: “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found.”

Joy is a reaction to rescue. Joy is a reaction to victory. Joy is the anticipation of better things. Yet all those reactions and anticipations start from a place of great need.

Joy is an emotion, to be sure. Joy is not a manufactured emotion, but it is a remembered and experienced emotion. It is an expression of remembered blessing; it is the manifestation of victory; it is the attitude of determined perseverance in the midst of present suffering. Joy is a part of Advent, a part of Christmas, a part of our looking forward.

Author Leo Buscaglia told a story about his mother and their "misery dinner." It was the night after his father came home and said it looked as if he would have to go into bankruptcy because his partner had embezzled their firm's funds and run away. His mother went out and sold some jewelry to buy food for a sumptuous feast. Other members of the family scolded her for it. But she told them that "the time for joy is now, when we need it most, not next week." Her courageous act rallied the family. (from sermonillustrations.com) They remembered their blessings and turned their eyes forward, anticipating the joy of rescue and restoration.

What are the tough times you face? Unlike the Israelites, we cannot point to foreign oppressors who are keeping us from experiencing joy. What are the things that would cloud your

experiencing and expressing joy? For some, it is the press of monthly bills that are piling up, the fear of trying to figure out how they are going to make ends meet. For others, it is the question of health and whether they will be strong enough or able enough to continue to be independent. For others still it is the loss of something or someone important to them – either through death or brokenness.

Whatever it is, the darkness can seem overwhelming; it can seem so heavy and oppressive that there is no way out. In these circumstances, joy is not a Pollyanna plastic smile pasted over the difficulties, joy is the attitude of determined persistence in the midst of the present suffering – holding fast to the vision of a savior, of redemption, of restoration, of rescue. This is the joy of Advent.

We see joy a lot in sporting events. Winning teams are often interviewed even as the champagne is being sprayed around a locker room. Tears in their eyes, they talk about how meaningful is this victory, the championship, how they came from nowhere, fought through adversity, worked together towards this goal, and how sweet is the victory. Joy is a reaction to victory. This is the joy of Christmas.

In the time leading up to Christmas, children often act as they do waiting in line to enter an amusement park for the first time. There is wonder at the sights and the sounds. There is excitement at they marvel at the mystery and the potential. There is hopeful expectation for the emotional feelings they anticipate having. Joy is the anticipation of things to come. This is the joy of living in the already/not yet time; the Messiah has come, the Messiah will come again. It is the joy of looking forward.

Joy means seeing things with God's eyes; trusting his promises, living into the reality He has revealed – even when it does not seem like it is happening. Joy means reaching out and sharing with others the good news so that they, too, might have hope and expectation and share in the joy of what God is doing.

It was quarter past dawn...All the Whos, still a-bed, All the Whos, still a-snooze
When he packed up his sled, Packed it up with their presents! The ribbons! The
wrappings! The tags! And the tinsel! The trimmings! The trappings!

Three thousand feet up! Up the side of Mount Crumpit, He rode to the tiptop to dump
it! "Pooh-pooh to the Whos!" he was grinch-ish-ly humming. "They're finding out
now that no Christmas is coming! "They're just waking up! I know just what they'll
do! "Their mouths will hang open a minute or two "Then all the Whos down in Who-
ville will all cry BOO-HOO!"

"That's a noise," grinned the Grinch, "That I simply must hear!" So he paused. And the
Grinch put a hand to his ear. And he did hear a sound rising over the snow. It started in
low. Then it started to grow...

But the sound wasn't sad! Why, this sound sounded merry! It couldn't be so! But it
WAS merry! VERY! He stared down at Who-ville! The Grinch popped his eyes!

Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise!

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, Was singing! Without any presents at all! He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so? It came without ribbons! It came without tags! "It came without packages, boxes or bags!" And he puzzled three hours, `till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! "Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store." Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

It means so much more – as the Who's down in Whoville knew. They sang because heaven and nature sing; they sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king!"

So, why are Advent and Christmas times of joy? They are times of joy because they are celebrations of all three phases of joy: the promise of rescue, a victory, an anticipation of better things.

All right, then, Pastor Grinch: Is it OK to give gifts? Absolutely. Just remember *why* we give gifts. We give because we are imitating God who gave us the greatest gift: his only begotten Son, our savior, our redeemer.

We give as a tangible reminder the joy of a blessing: God did not abandon us. God did not give up on us. God did not walk away from us. He gave us hope, he gave us peace, he gave us joy. He gave us Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

8:45 prayer and offering