

Christmas Eve, 2017
“Life and Light”: Joy and Endurance



Teaching Notes...

I think I've realized that the Advent season is perfectly suited for my temperament.

It's about a people who were convinced that God was writing a story about his dream for the world, come true. This story was being woven through every fiber of our experience, even all that seemed to resist it, or stand in direct opposition to it.

It required honest, faith-filled responses from people who were attempting to fend off despair; who were making declarations about things they believed to be true, few of which seemed to be supported by their present experience.

They were people who refused to simply learn how to cope or adapt to all the dysfunctionality; who are discovering the rugged commitment that love demands, in such a self-indulgent world; who are convinced that joy is a much healthier aspiration than happiness.

They were a people who had to learn to delay gratification because they realized that they would never experience, fully, all that the story offered, or all that their hearts desired, in the present. They weren't naïve, just hope-full.

Advent is a season where we are called to rehearse the longings of an ancient people "in waiting". Waiting for what? Salvation. The great reversal. For God to come and finally address all that's gone... with us... with the world.

After (4) centuries of silence, when God does finally speak, what will he say to his people? After all, he's had plenty of time to brood over his disappointment and frustration with the infidelity of his people. The messenger of God breaks the silence and says, *"Don't be afraid. It's time. Good news. Great joy."*

Joy is, perhaps, Advent's best gift to us.

It doesn't force us to generate some *"Christmas Cheer"* or *"holiday spirit"*. It never encourages us to live in denial of all the ways that our world still lacks hope.

Joy is what hope looks like in 'real time'.

"His mighty arm has done tremendous things. He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away, empty-handed".

Luke 1:51-54

Joy doesn't alter our life-circumstances, it simply 're-interprets' them.

Everything you find yourself doing or declaring is *"in spite of"* what you see or what you don't see. It's birthed in hope, which is rooted in faith/trust, which assumes a posture of joy.

"joy": *to be glad, to be well, to thrive, to flourish*

While joy is certainly inclusive of happiness, it is simply more robust.

Metaphorically, **joy**...

... comes in the a.m.; it's something that dawns after long hours darkness and weeping.

... is a posture, not our default response [assessment: *'count it all joy...*]

... is often found in the last places you would think to look ["when you find yourself in adversity", James]

... is closely connected to all that we are willing to endure in order to experience the realization of what we are expecting.

Paradoxically, joy and endurance are often offered in tandem.

The pain and confusion you are able to endure seems proportionate to the joy you anticipate, as a result. You can endure a lot in your life **IF** you believe that what's happening presently **won't last forever** and somehow **doesn't compare with what you will experience beyond it** (Romans 8:1:18 *"I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times."*)

Joy is something you experience now because it is something that you have "set before you".

Hebrews 12:2 " ... keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross..."

It doesn't matter how much you can tolerate or what your pain threshold, *if you don't believe that God is good, your endurance will result, not in joy, but in resentment and bitterness.*

What we set before us must be linked to some reasonable expectation of a better future (hope), which must be connected to a faithful story of possibilities. It must offer us some semblance of order/functionality in the midst of all that resists peace. It must prompt us to love one another well, in ways that diminish our tendencies toward self-indulgence. It must make us resilient, in the face of all that opposes God's salvation work.

It is out of the raw materials of our present situation that God creates the opportunities for joy.

"What is the joy that is set before you? What are you trusting? How certain are you of its ability to make good on its promises? What if the joy you are seeking is actually residing somewhere within your adverse circumstance? Is it possible that the joy available to you is in the power of the commitments that you make in midst of the difficult marriage, failing health, demanding children, the thankless job, and the aging parents?"

The stories of the first Christmas are not held before us as some sentimental model meant to provide a temporary distraction from all that impedes our holiday spirit. Advent invites a response.

For some, we're the Magi who are re-thinking the present course of their lives [they *"returned home by another route"*, Matthew 2:12). They no longer remained on that same path. They chose another way.

For some, we are the shepherds: we feel marginalized and unnoticed; wondering why God would choose to reveal himself to us, but we're willing to 'check it out'. For some, we are Joseph, simply being called upon to respond in obedience in order to facilitate the work of God in the world. For some, we are Mary: being asked to provide the space within us where the life of Jesus might be nurtured and developed so that it might eventually be birthed into the world.

Or, perhaps we were the **countless others** who received the news about Jesus from others. We're not sure what to make of it or what to do with it.

Find a community on this journey, with whom you might **belong**, while your **beliefs** are being formed. Assimilate your experience and **bless** others--- be good for your world.