

Sing a Song of Joy! (Isaiah 61:1-3; Acts 14:5-21; Luke 1:39-56)

One cold December Sunday, the congregation of a little church went over to the nearby river where they held their baptisms. There were several persons who were going to be baptized that day. One man who was to be baptized was really nervous. He was new to all this church stuff, and so he didn't quite know what was going to happen. So, he made sure that he was last in line to be baptized. Then, he watched as the first person came up out of the water. She quoted a Bible verse: "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Then another man was baptized, and when he came up out of the water, he said, "The Lord is my shepherd." Then another man said, "I can do all things through Christ." Suddenly, it was his turn. He went under the icy water and came back up, gasping for air. He didn't know any Bible verse to quote. So he looked around at the crowd and simply shouted joyfully, "Merry Christmas, everyone!"

This man may not have known any scripture, but he had experienced, understood, and expressed not only the heart of the occasion but also the heart of the season and the foundation of the faith. He shouted joyfully, "Merry Christmas, everyone!"

Isaiah sang a merry song of when God would "bring good news to the oppressed...bind up the brokenhearted...proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...comfort all who mourn." When the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, she too burst into a song of joy. She sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" When Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited Elizabeth, Elizabeth's unborn baby leaped for joy within her. John the Baptist leaped for joy when first in the presence of Jesus. And when Jesus was born, an angel appeared to shepherds and said, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." The first disciples, as we read in our second reading, went everywhere singing the joyful song of the good news God wanted them to share.

You know, throughout history, at times the faith has gotten off track. Instead of singing a song of joy—of good news—we've sung a song of fear and guilt and judgment. But on this third Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that the song of joyful good news sung by Isaiah, Mary, John the

Baptist, the angel, and the apostles is one of the primary songs you and I should be singing this season.

You know, we all sing a song in our minds and hearts--if not with our voices--all the time. Oftentimes, though, the song we sing is something like "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

A disappointed first grader opened the door and walked into her home. "I'm to be one of the children at the manger in the Christmas play," she announced glumly. "But that's wonderful! Why are you so sad?" asked her mother. "I wanted to be an angel," the little girl explained. "They're the ones who sing the song of rejoicing." Then the little girl added, "I can't rejoice unless I'm an angel." The little girl thought that only angels get to rejoice. Similarly, we tend to think that we can't sing a joyful song unless everything's wonderful.

And, as we all know, life's not always wonderful. Life has a way of knocking us down and beating us up. Every day can be a challenge—physically; emotionally; mentally; spiritually; financially. But the angel said, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." Joy can give us courage to face whatever comes our way.

A certain man who served in the Air Corps during World War II told his son of his experience after being shot down behind enemy lines. He was captured and taken to a prison camp, where, along with the other prisoners, he was tortured. He told his son that the only thing that made him able to endure the ordeal was the songs he had learned in Sunday school when he was growing up. He really had not been much of a Christian, but he remembered the hymns and the carols that assured him that God is God and that God loved him and cared what was happening to him. He kept remembering those songs and either humming them or singing them when he could, and they helped him to keep everything in perspective and to find the strength to carry on."¹

Harry Emerson Fosdick preached, "He (Jesus) is the light of the world, and he is the light of joy. This is your best gift at Christmas. He has come to save the world, and he has come to save you. This is why in the darkness of

¹ Killen Jr., James L., "With a Song In Your Heart"

fear, the light of joy still smiles on us. It is a joy which casts out all fear.”² We may not know what’s going to happen, in the future, but because of Christmas, we do know that God loves us so much that he has come to be with us.

This joy can sustain us in any circumstance. It sustained the man who was in the prison camp tortured during World War II. It sustained Mary, facing ostracism from her parents and her fiancé Joseph and death from the village elders because of her pregnancy. It sustained the apostles, who even though persecuted, were so full of joy that they kept proclaiming the good news. I love the end of today’s Acts of the Apostles reading: “Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch” (Acts 14:5-21) Paul’s life was certainly not easy. But he endured all his tribulations with a song of joy in his heart. Remember what he wrote in Philippians? “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). Knock down those who understand the true meaning of Christmas, and they got right back up singing the same song of joy!

The joy of Christmas is precious indeed. And this joy doesn’t come from the things upon which the world places value. If we look around us, we’ll see people who have everything but the right song and thus live as if they have nothing. And we’ll see people who seem to have nothing but the right song who are living as if they have everything. What a difference singing the right song makes!

Joy is one of the fruits of the spirit. It takes root within us when we invite God’s Holy Spirit into our lives and live in relationship with God, through prayer, listening to him talk in scripture, and regularly meeting with a community of believers, where he is here in our midst. It grows within us as we come to know and trust our Lord so much that we, like Mary, believe the words of the angel, who said, “Nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).

² Fosdick, Harry Emerson, “Christ Himself Is Christianity”

Joy builds in us when we, like Mary, submit to the Lord's will for us, when we too come to say to God, "let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Hannah Whitall Smith's classic The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life has one line that speaks volumes: "Perfect obedience would result in perfect happiness (joy) if only we had perfect confidence in the power we were obeying."³

Friends, we have every reason to have perfect confidence in the power we obey because throughout history, it has been clear that our God has a plan—a plan of goodness, justice, mercy, love, not only for each one of us, but also for all of his creation. As Isaiah prophesied, God's plan is 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" (Isaiah 61:1-3). Or, as Mary understood it, "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:39-56). Or, as Jesus later said when he began his ministry by quoting Isaiah: "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..." (Isaiah 61:1-3).

Terrible things happen in our lives and in our world, the result of our poor choices or the poor choices of others, but they are not God's intention for us. For he loves us. And he'll never abandon us. He's constantly working in everything to heal things and people, moving us all forward toward a better future.

The eighteenth century in England was not a happy time for many persons. It was the time of the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, a time when many moved to cities, where they worked long hours at hard labor for very little pay. Lots of people lived in poverty in England. The Wesleyan evangelists told the poor people, who felt like outsiders, that God loved

³ Smith, Hannah Whitall, The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life. Westwood, New Jersey, 1985

them and gave his Son to die for them and that salvation, both now and hereafter, was possible for them. It gave them a new outlook on life. And the Wesleyan revival produced thousands of hymns intended to let the poor people sing the new faith that they had found. The songs made a difference in countless lives.

I don't know about you, but my day goes better when I listen to some encouraging, joyful religious music. Subconsciously, it permeates my mind, my soul, my heart, and I'm more joyful throughout the day. Many studies have been done about how we are affected by what we watch on TV and at the movies, by the kind of music we listen to. You and I both know this is true, because of our own first-hand experience. When we see a scary or violent movie, it affects us. We double check at night that the doors are locked. We look more suspiciously on the stranger. So too, singing a song of joy affects us positively, changes our outlook on life.

And the good news can change the outlook on life of all those around us. We Christians have glorious good news! How can we not share it! For when we humans have good news, we just have to share it don't we? If we're expecting a child, if we finally have a job, if something wonderful happens to us—we call someone and share it. As soon as the angel Gabriel left Mary, Mary took off to share the good news with her cousin Elizabeth. So too we will tell others if we truly understand how wonderful the good news is that God gives us—that he loves us; that he's with us; that he's constantly lovingly working to bring justice, peace, and love in our lives and in our world.

Each of us chooses what song we're going to sing. "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" or "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" Let us choose to sing a song of joy—for ourselves and for others. Amen.

--Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; December 14, 2008