

Joy Like a Fountain

Hope, peace, joy: we have come to the week of the pink candle, the third week of Advent. If, like me, you were not raised in a liturgical Christian tradition, the deeper meanings of this particular rite may be obscure. In our current society's over-hyped lead up to Christmas, for example, it is easy for us to forget or to have never known that Advent was originally considered to be a time for reflection and repentance. These days, we usually talk about our purple candles and décor as referring to the royal birth we are preparing to celebrate, the birth of the little King in Bethlehem. Purple has always been a color associated with royalty, given the rarity of purple dye in the ancient world and its resultant expense. But purple is also a somber color, which we recall with our use of purple candles in Lent. For centuries, Advent was a kind of shorter Lent, a time of contemplative preparation for the coming of Christ rather than a drawn-out birthday party. Christians fasted and prayed during Advent, just as they did during Lent. And, just as the fourth Sunday of Lent was celebrated as Laetare Sunday, or "Be Joyful" Sunday, with the fast broken and celebratory pink vestments worn by the priests, so this third Sunday of Advent was dedicated to joy with a break from fast and pink rather than purple décor.

But our dominant culture now is not very good at waiting and not much given to contemplation or repentance. In fact, the norm is to shun such attitudes, hurrying, always hurrying, toward the next big thing, the next party, the next holiday, forgetting, of course, that a holiday is really a Holy Day, a day to be kept separate, so that its meaning may be savored in the moment rather than lost in a bustle of distraction. If I sound too gloomy on what is supposed to be a Sunday of joy, I apologize. But I do wonder if we could be more truly joyful if we stopped trying to convince ourselves that we were always happy? If we took the time to be quiet and think, to reflect on the deep things in our lives and especially the deep things of God in our lives, wouldn't that allow us to appreciate, to enjoy the really good things in our lives even in the midst of acknowledged crises? If we just cover up our grief or worry with a façade of shallow happiness rather than working through our troubles, we will never reach the down-deep joy that is God's promise for us.

I think Isaiah understood this. That's why he speaks of wilderness become beautiful. There was no sense in sugar-coating the situation the Children of Israel found themselves in at his writing. Their Northern Kingdom had been utterly destroyed by the Assyrians; ten of the twelve landed tribes were gone without a trace, never to be seen again. The Southern Kingdom had been defeated by the Babylonians, Jerusalem burned, the Temple destroyed and most of the populace taken into exile. How could they sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land? How could they worship so far from God's holy mountain? Could God even hear their prayers in a place where the Babylonians' gods reigned? Had God abandoned them? That's a wilderness existence and no doubt. These were people who understood the wilderness, both metaphorically and literally. They knew the existence of counting on the infrequent rains to deliver them from drought, of deserts and burning sands, of rugged places where even goat tracks failed and where the unwary could easily become lost, where lions or hunting packs of jackals were a danger to livestock and herders alike.

We may not know that kind of wilderness very well, we who are primarily urban dwellers with cell phones and GPS to ensure that we are never out of touch, never lost beyond finding, but we certainly understand metaphorical wilderness. We know what it is to wander in dry lands of grief and doubt, to be lost in a myriad of choices. We know full well of the ravaging and roaring

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lion of addiction, of wolves in human form like the money-lender I mentioned last week, prowling to take advantage of the weak and unwise. Sometimes, it may seem like our troubles encircle us like that pack of hunting jackals – not all that menacing singly, but overwhelming in combination. Is there any among us who has not faced times that make our hands tremble, that make our knees give out? Have we not all from time to time known fear down in our hearts?

Jesus said, “Fear not, little flock, for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.” Isaiah said, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God... God will come and save you.” Though our lives have become parched by worry, stress or grief, they will blossom abundantly. If we seize the hope offered by God in the promise of Emmanuel, if we pursue the path of peace which is the blessed Shalom, the wholeness of abundant life which is in Christ Jesus, then we shall also find the deep joy which cracks open our dry lives, allowing the glory of God to fill and burst through our lives. Our joy shall become like a fountain, filling the dry reservoirs of our lives and spraying out to touch and to bless all those around us.

It may be a little hard for us today to think of water as the symbol of joy. In a region where water is always abundant and where the Pineapple Express is dumping more than we really need on us this weekend, we might be more inclined to think of a nice dry sunny day as joyous. But our Scriptures were born in lands that rarely received enough rain, especially after they’d been deforested and over-farmed. It’s why Isaiah uses this metaphor and it also helps explain Jesus’ self-image as the Water of Life. To the woman of Samaria at the well, Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Later, to a crowd at a festival in Jerusalem, he said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” When we think of Jesus as the source of the living water of faith, the heart nourished by the in-dwelling Spirit of God, we can also point to Jesus as the source of the joy that wells up in our lives when we take seriously the promise of God to bless both the people and the planet with life that is rich and abundant.

For those of us who follow the path of the Christ, the water of abundant life and joy is also the water of remission of sins. Just as water turns the wilderness from dry desert to blossoming wetland, so the water of baptism marks the beginning of change in us. For all of us, that water symbolizes the start of our life in Christ, whether we experienced it as infants, the choice of our parents later confirmed in us by our own vows, or as believers choosing for ourselves to take up the cross. The water of baptism is for us the most powerful symbol of God’s ongoing love for us, that while we were yet sinners, God proved God’s love for us through the death of Jesus, reconciling us to Godself. We are washed clean of all our rebellion, all our brokenness, all our mistakes, all our ugly choices, all our sins and freed from the power of Sin, every day that we turn our eyes to God and remember, like Martin Luther, that we are baptized. In this, the water of baptism, the water of renewed life, becomes again in our lives the water of joy, which empowers us and which cannot be hoarded but only shared. For those of us who can remember our baptisms, there is also surely the memory of the joy of that moment, when we participated in the deepest symbol of committing our lives to Christ. The water of baptism is the water of joy indeed.

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As we allow the water of joy, the water of life, to transform our lives, not only will our lives blossom, despite assault from harsh desert-like conditions around us, but we will also be a part of establishing the highway of God. For not only will we find the way forward, through obstacles and towards God, to be easier when fed by the fountain of joy but we will also mark the paths for others. True joy, joy that endures even in the face of suffering, is a beacon to those who glimpse it in our lives. When we live lives of hope and peace, joy and love, we lead others into the presence of our Loving Creator. Our acceptance of God's blessings, our thankfulness for God's love, our own joy at living with a hint of the abundant life, even if it is tentative and incomplete, not only propels us along the Holy Way but helps those who see our lives turn toward it as well. With our legs strengthened for the journey, with the strength of our hands restored for the work of the Lord, with fear banished, we can become powerful voices newly speaking the words of Isaiah: "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God... God HAS come to save us all." No more is the world divided between clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, for in Christ the walls are broken down and the good news goes out to all people of good will: "the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

Sorrow and sighing have not yet passed from this earth nor even, alas, from the lives of the ransomed of the Lord. But for those of us who have claimed the freedom of the redeemed, offered to all but not yet recognized by some, the promise of joy has already begun to make itself manifest in our lives. Despite whatever trials may hem us in and threaten to drain us as dry as the wilderness, we understand that the chief end of humankind is, as our Presbyterian brothers and sisters teach, "to glorify God and enjoy God forever." What a wonderful word! When we take up the cross of Jesus, we understand that we invite suffering for the world will oppose us. We understand that as the Body of Christ, we are the servants of God, working to complete the realization of the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God. But our ultimate reality is not suffering or even of blessed service. My sisters and brothers, we are the beloved of God, joint heirs in that Kingdom with our brother, Christ Jesus. Our final calling is not just to give glory to God but also to live in the joy of the presence of God, the only joy that ultimately cannot be quenched. Our joy is like a fountain of baptismal waters, dwelling deep in our hearts and gushing out in a glorious river, lifting us on its waves and nourishing those around us with its spray.

As a good Baptist preacher, I find it hard to resist occasionally giving an altar call but as the pastor of a flock who are almost all baptized any altar call that I give must be a little different. On the table before you, you see a bowl of water. It's not Holy Water in the Catholic sense – it came out of the tap in the church kitchen and nothing's been done to it. But I invite you today to see it as a representation of the water of the fountain of joy, the living water of the Holy Spirit, the symbolic water of baptism. As we sing of the glorious river of God's peace, love, hope and joy, I invite you to come and dip your hand into the water. Let a drop fall on your head and remember the joy of your own baptism or confirmation into the Body of Christ. Place a drop on your lips and think of how the joy that God gives restores a parched soul. Touch it above your heart and know the joy of being redeemed and made clean. God has promised that in God's Spirit, we shall find the water of joy and the water of life. May it always be so for all of us, on this day and forever more. Amen.