

Dec. 13, 2009

Philippians 4:4-9

Isaiah 12:2-6

In Our Midst

It's hard to believe that this is the third Sunday of Advent already! Before we know it, it will be Christmas! And there is still so much to do to prepare the way of the Lord!

Traditionally, this Sunday is named the Sunday of joy. We lit our third Advent candle a few minutes ago to symbolize joy, and we said together that we would rejoice in the Lord always and that we would seek to live in the joy of the Lord. Living with joy in our midst---it sounds so wonderful!

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But I am wondering how realistic it is. Is it possible to be joyful all the time----always? Isn't that just a form of denial of how bad things really are? Isn't it just fake or phony to put on a happy face all the time?

I had barely started writing this sermon a couple of days ago when I got a phone call from Darrel Hunstable's daughter telling

me that he had passed a9()3.97434(d)-0.616744(a)-0.613500JTJ -293.239 -32.160061(d)7

And where is joy when we are anxious about jobs and finances? Where is joy when we are worried or angry or lonely or depressed? Where is joy when our hearts are broken?

How do we find our way back to joy when there seems to be nothing to be joyful about?

Let me tell you about a friend of mine named Bob. Last year Bob was seriously ill and spent a number of weeks in the hospital. It has taken him a long time to recover, and he is still not as strong as he used to be. Yet even with this long struggle, there has always been a gleam in his eyes and a smile just waiting to show up on his face. He seems to know a secret.

He's a humble man, but there is an assurance about him, an air of confidence that can't be shaken.

People are drawn to Bob. Wherever he goes, people listen to what he has to say. They want to be with him. I think they're trying to figure out his secret----what it is that makes him so assured, so confident, so calm and self-possessed!

He has what is called charisma---the effect of attracting people of all types and ages. People want Bob to be in their midst.

Bob's secret, as you may have guessed, is joy. Everyone wants to know just what it is that he is joyful about. They want to know how they can have that, too!

Bob is a singer and a guitar player. At times in his life he has performed professionally. His songs are not the blues. They are not full of angst and anger. And they aren't mindless little shallow ditties, either. They are upbeat but profound. They are uplifting yet thought-provoking. There is a message in them that comes from his heart.

They are full of joy, just like he is.

But I want to make it clear----- Bob doesn't gloss over the difficult parts of life. He faces them head on. He'll tell you when he doesn't like something and when things need to change. He's not a Pollyanna, ignoring the challenges and struggles of life. He's well-grounded and realistic.

And there is nothing annoyingly perky about him, or phony. He is not in denial.

So where does his joy come from? That true, deep feeling of joy that is part of his very existence? The joy that he is in the midst of?

We could ask the same thing about the prophet Isaiah.

The passage that we read this morning was written sometime in the 8th century BC. During that century Israel experienced two wars. It was not an easy time, nor a time of prosperity.

The people undoubtedly grieved the loss of loved ones lost in the war. They were anxious about the present and worried about the future. They wondered what they had done to deserve such a horrible time to live in.

Isaiah must have felt hopeless at times. He kept telling the king and the people to return to God, to remember their covenant with God, but the king did not listen to him and the people continued to turn away from God.

And it didn't seem like anything Isaiah said was going to change that.

In the midst of that hopeless situation, instead of falling into despair, Isaiah found a reason for joy!

He exults that God is his salvation, that there is no reason to fear! God has done great things for us, he reminds the people, so "Shout for joy! For great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!"

The apostle Paul found reason to rejoice as well, even though he was writing from prison to the church at Philippi about a problem between two women that was damaging the fellowship of the church. He tells us to "be anxious for nothing" and that "the Lord is near."

And I think there is an insight here.

If we are rejoicing over what God has done for us, if we are rejoicing because the Lord is near, then we won't be worried or anxious or picking on each other or angry or afraid.

Instead we will be aware of the presence of God, the love of God, and the many blessings that God has given to us! We will be focusing on praising God instead of on our problems.

But that still leaves us with questions about HOW to rejoice, how to turn our attention to God when we are up to our eyeballs in things to take care of, things to do, things to worry about. Things that hurt and people to grieve.

When life hits us hard, how do we find joy in our midst?

When grief and anxiety and despair overtake us, is it still possible to find joy?

The first thing I want to say about this question is that “rejoicing in the Lord always” does not mean that we will never cry or hurt. It doesn’t mean that we need to hide or deny our unhappy feelings. It doesn’t mean that we need to put on our happy face at all times and in all places.

Joy is different from happiness. Joy is knowing that there is hope, and that hope is in God alone. Joy is knowing that God is still creating, that God really does love us, that God is with us no matter what is happening in our lives.

No matter what we are concerned about, God knows. God is there with us. God cares.

The reason that we find it so hard to rejoice in the Lord always is not that God has gone away or that God doesn’t care. It’s that we get so distracted that we take our eyes off of Jesus Christ!

We need to remember that we always have choices, even in the worst situations. There are little voices in our head and we can choose which one to listen to.

When things go wrong, we can listen to the voice that is full of hate and fear, the one that brings anxiety and despair, or we can listen to the voice that tells us that God still loves us and takes care of us, that God is still the one true God!

We always have a choice. When we are filled with grief, we can listen to the voice that says “no one, not even God cares about me any more” or we can listen to the voice that says “remember all the good times! Rejoice that God gave us such a gift in loving and being loved for so long!”

When we are worried about our jobs and our finances, we can listen to the voice that says “We’re going to end up homeless and bankrupt” or we can decide to listen to the voice that tells us that even if we lose everything God will still love us, and we will still have each other.

When we are ill we can listen to the voice that says that God has deserted us, or we can choose to listen to the voice that says we are still loved, God still takes of us, God understands.

When we are lonely we can listen to the voice that says we don’t deserve to be loved, or we can hear God saying that he loves us very much.

If we choose to listen to the positive, empowering voices, then we are choosing joy. Those positive voices are not fake. They are not lying to us.

In fact, they are telling the truth, the Good News, the gospel that God loves us so much he sent his only son to save us! They tell us the truth of God's mercy and grace! They repeat over and over again the truth that God is in our midst!

The other voices, the voices of hate and fear and hopelessness----they are the voice of the tempter, the liar, the one we name the Devil, or Satan. Those voices come from a very dark place.

So getting back to Bob---what does he have that we don't?? Nothing, really. He has simply chosen what voice he will listen to--- the voice of truth and love and light, the one that tells him that God loves him and is always with him.

Isaiah made the same choice in a time of war. Paul made the same choice even when he was in prison.

What voice will you choose to listen to? Choose the voice that leads to God! The one that is filled with light and love!

The one that tells you that God is in our midst, that God sent Jesus Christ because he loves us very much! That voice is the Holy Spirit working in us and among us!

Emmanuel----God with us, in our midst! Speaking words of truth in our hearts.

Choose to listen, open your hearts to God in our midst, and rejoice!

Amen