Joy Comes

Advent III December 12, 2021

Isaiah 12: 2-6 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Philippians 4: 4-7

Luke 3: 7-18

The classic children’s story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* describes the Grinch as hating Christmas:

The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season! Now please don’t ask why. No one quite knows the reason. It could be his head wasn’t screwed on just 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 mistletoe wreath…and they’d sing! Sing! Sing! Sing! And the more the Grinch thought of this 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 this Christmas from coming! But How?

I think we all know the story, he comes up with a plan to stop Christmas, to make everyone else as miserable as he is. He hopes to put them all into sadness and despair.

The context of all of our readings today are set in the midst of despair. The Israelites of Isaiah, are in exile in Babylon after having their city of Jerusalem and their Temple destroyed. Many would have been killed, including children. Yet the passage we read today is about thanksgiving and joy. What Isaiah is declaring in his “psalm” is that Yahweh is Israel’s ultimate “savior” who will deliver them from physical, political, social, economic and spiritual troubles – whether those troubles are caused by Israel’s political, economic and religious leaders, by kings and generals and armies of other nations or even by the way Israelites treat each other. The people are given hope, are encouraged to rejoice and experience joy.

The context of the reading from Philippians is Paul writing from prison, supported by a friend Epaphroditus who almost died, risking his life for the work of Christ. Paul is concerned about the Philippians and encourages them to rejoice in the Lord, and live with gentleness, doing what is just, pure and commendable. Paula Works, Professor of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary tells us:

“Joy, for Paul, is not a feeling that is dependent upon circumstances. It is a theological act. It is choosing to reflect on God’s actions to redeem the cosmos even when all the present circumstances might indicate that some other power had won. Joy stems from his vision of God’s super-exaltation of Christ after his super-humiliation with death on a treasonous cross. Joy stems from the vision that all the world will recognize the sovereignty of Jesus when he returns.”

Paul draws his joy from the knowledge of Christ’s presence and power, which gives him hope.

The context for our reading from Luke about John the Baptist is that the people are living under Roman occupation, oppressed and fearful of the powers that exploit them. Two of those powers are presented in the story, the tax collectors and the Roman Soldiers. Both are despised by the people because they use their power to exploit them. Tax collectors were among the most hated in society, as they were told that they could collect whatever they wanted from the people as long as they forwarded the proscribed amount to the Roman authorities. Thus, they made themselves rich by extorting the poor. Roman soldiers often supplemented their meager wages by bribing those who were imprisoned or accused. So, when tax collectors and soldiers approach John to ask what they must do in response to his call to repentance, it was probably astounding to the crowds. More astounding was the revolutionary response of John. The tax collector was told to collect only what was officially proscribed of them and nothing more. To the Roman soldiers he told them to stop exploiting people and threatening them with false accusations, and be satisfied with their wages. If these simple actions were lived out, Rome’s power of fear over the people would be utterly destroyed. This was the good news John was bringing. This would bring hope to those who witnessed it and that hope of a new world, a new way of being leads to the great joy that the Angels sang about.

In each of these stories, joy is experienced or encouraged in the midst of despair or the challenges in life. There is a common theme as well of Hope in each of the passages. It is hope in God’s vision, God’s message, in good news proclaimed and experienced, in Christ coming, that brings joy. I am noticing this year that while the theme of the first week’s Advent is Hope, it seems hope carries through each of the themes of the weeks. Hope helps us experience peace. Hope brings joy. Is it possible to experience joy if we have no hope? I am not sure it is. So, it is important to hold on to hope and encourage others to maintain that hope as well.

Another important message in the readings today is that joy can be experienced in the midst of despair, pain, suffering, and life challenges. This may seem incongruous or incompatible but there are moments of joy or happiness we can experience in the midst of grief. How often have you laughed at a funeral in hearing a funny story about the one who has died? This is a good thing. It is important to honour and celebrate these moments that we experience in the midst of sadness, grief or despair as they can help us through the pain. Too often we may feel guilty about it when it is an important part of the healing and life.

We can acknowledge this as we think about these past almost two years of this pandemic, as well as all we have gone through in life and think about where or when have we experienced joy during these days?

We have experienced Joy in being back worshipping in person, and in celebrating the presence of baby Kinsley with us.

We have experienced Joy in connecting online and getting support through these days and months in fellowship on Zoom.

We have experienced Joy in supporting those in need of food security who suffer even more during this pandemic time

We have experienced Joy in gathering to sing Christmas Carols this week

We have experienced Joy in going for walks with friends

We have experienced Joy in being able to go out for dinner again

We have experienced Joy in celebrating with family or friends

And after the Grinch was done stealing what he thought was Christmas, in the midst of what he hoped would be sadness the Who’s down in Whoville found joy:

And he did hear a sound rising over the snow, it start 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!...Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small, was singing! With out any presents at all! He hadn’t stopped Christmas from coming! It came! Somehow or other it came, just the same!

It came just the same. The Who’s down in Whoville knew Christmas was more than gifts, or boxes or bows. Christmas is about hope, and love breaking into our lives that can transform us, and bring a joy that we didn’t know was possible. May you truly experience that joy this season and always, especially in the midst of any pain or despair, or challenges you may experience.