

Sermon

Proper 22

10/5/14

*“The heavens declare the glory of God  
And the firmament sheweth his handiwork.  
Day unto day uttereth speech  
And night unto night sheweth knowledge.”*

These opening lines to the psalm appointed for today, Psalm 19 (in the King James Version), begin a sacred poem that C. S. Lewis called one of the greatest poems not only in the Bible, but in all of literature. They are words that I quote often in my life, not just because they roll off the tongue so eloquently, but in response to something in the moment that I am experiencing in my life.

One example is when I am out in the country, someplace like Lake Logan where I go on my annual retreat with my friend. Out there, I am able to look up into the night sky without the haze of city lights and pollution. On those nights, I can see stars and planets and take in more clearly at least a part of God’s beautiful and broad creation.

I say those words when I see a beautiful sunset. They spill out as an almost involuntary response to God’s goodness in creation. I also say them when I am experiencing a storm with thunder and lightning and heavy rain. I can say them more easily if I am experiencing the storm from a place of shelter (if I am out in the middle of the storm without protection, it is harder to wax poetic).

This psalm-- and especially this psalm recited as a response to God’s creation-- is an example of joy. Joy is one of those words like love that can be both over used and ignored in such a way that we forget what it really means. A question for all of us to consider today and in our future is “What gives me joy?” What in my life causes that strong and sweet emotion to rise up from the depth of my soul and sing out to God in response to God’s goodness?

To consider ways we can answer that question, “What gives me joy?” we can explore some obvious things that awake something in us which, if it is not joy, is at least a cousin. A simple and silly example is what we “like” on Facebook (I know, I know—stay with me on this one). What do you like (if you do Facebook)? A commonly liked thing is a video having to do with animals—cute kittens and puppies and even baby goats doing cute things. There is something about these scenes that make us smile and even “LOL”. And if you want a good, real world version of this, come to the Blessing of the Animals at 2 pm today.

The same emotions do occur in the real world (thank God). What makes us smile, what gives us joy in our day to day lives? In addition to animals, a source of joy is babies and young children. Just look around us at church today—we are blessed with so many youngsters in this parish. When they come up to sing, when they are learning in Sunday school, when they are just being held by their mom or dad, there is something about little ones that make us want to come up to them and enjoy being in their presence. What a gift of joy-- and a responsibility.

Opportunities for joy do surround us. Big and little things give joy—from a sunset to a child to the fact that I can control my hand and move my fingers to hold and create and love. Remarkable gifts from God which-- if we will open our eyes and our hearts-- will bring consistent joy to us, to guide how we live and the attitude we bring with us in life.

But what else brings joy besides these natural gifts of life? A different type of joy comes from God changing us, what the psalmist calls “the joy of your salvation.” Besides our natural responses to God gifts, God also helps us to grow in our understanding of the world and how God sees it. The world is complicated. Like I said in last week’s sermon, there are places where we hurt as individuals and families and as a society. The reality of joy and the reality of suffering coexist in our world.

So any understanding of joy must include how we respond to suffering. In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that “For the sake of the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, disregarding its shame...” Jesus’ example shows us the way to live with the suffering of our lives—and in the lives of others—with an enduring and motivating joy.

Throughout his life, Jesus noticed what was beautiful and joy-giving and incorporated it into his teaching, like when he said, “Consider the lilies of the field...” But the same Jesus, who noticed and appreciated flowers, also took notice of people who were sick and excluded from his world. Jesus touched and healed lepers; he did not turn the other way just to look for what was beautiful in life. The deeper joy Jesus felt was from listening to God’s Spirit in his life and doing God’s work in the world.

That is the joy of our salvation that we too must seek in our world. That type of joy may not be the same as the instant happy response we have when we see videos of puppies on Facebook or cute children singing in our choir. Rather it is the joy that comes when we align our lives—our attitudes and beliefs, our actions and words—with God’s purpose for our world.

God’s purpose includes working for justice for those who go without it; and seeking mercy and compassion for those who need it. When we respond in big and small ways to the promptings we discern from God’s purpose for this world, we find a deeper joy that is more than superficial happiness or smug self-righteousness. That type of joy bubbles up when we participate fully in God’s great creation. Joy like that can come from comforting a crying child-- or lobbying our elected officials for more just sentencing for people in our judicial system.

Real joy is present even in the midst of the suffering we all endure—the suffering that leads to and comes from death. As Christians, we have hope for eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But when someone we love dies, we still grieve; and as the prayer book states, “human grief is

not unchristian.” But that grief is always contained within our hope in Christ. So as the prayer book states, “The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy...characterized by joy.” That is why we can say in the liturgy, “Life has changed not ended” and “yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.” This type of joy helps us to face even our own death or the death of a loved one with hope for a new and better life in Christ after we die.

Last week I asked, “Where do you hurt?” This week I ask us all to remember and take with us the question, “What gives you joy?” Let us take time to enjoy all the blessings of this life—children and sunsets and even cute puppy videos in Facebook. Those are wonderful gifts from a loving God! But let us also seek that deeper joy, the joy of our salvation, that joy that comes from our faith in Christ. Let us follow the example of his life and seek his joy-filled grace to face whatever suffering we may find in life. That joy can fill us today and through our earthly lives until our joy is finally consummated in heaven. Amen.