

Joy for the Journey
The Third Sunday in Advent
December 16, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007
Gates Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:1-10
Matthew 11:1-10

On the front page of today's Democrat & Chronicle, we found an article of how the Hannah Montana concert is going on today as scheduled – no matter the snow and sleet. The mother, tells of her frustration in her attempt to get tickets the moment they were available on line but then expresses joy and happiness that she was able to secure four tickets – for \$1800 – because her five year old daughter is just crazy about Hannah Montana. I am happy she is happy. I am not sure the story brings me joy.

Dictionaries, both the hard cover type and those on-line would have us believe that the words “happy” and “joyous” are synonymous. It may be true that the mother who was able to purchase those four precious tickets is both happy and joyous, but there are distinct differences to be found between those two words, particularly in the context of our faith.

In words read this morning, Isaiah expressed joy – near exuberance - that God's people would one day return from exile and that in some time in the future, the peoples of the world would know peace to the point that we would witness

- weakened hands strengthened,
- feeble knees made firm,
- fearful hearts made strong,
- eyes of the blind opened,
- ears of the deaf unstopped,
- lame leaping like a deer,
- speechless singing for joy,
- waters in the wilderness,
- streams in the dessert,
- burning sand a pool
- thirsty ground ... as springs of water

What promises! What joy! What exuberance!

Words of future joy expressed, Isaiah's present reality was hardly all that “happy.” He faced all too many nay-sayers, much of what God had him say to his people was about judgment and punishment – and you can just imagine how that was received! But the fact that Isaiah's life might have been devoid of day-to-day happiness, happiness born of creature comforts, did not preclude Isaiah from having an inner sense of joy. There is a difference!

In composing a little book titled “Five Cries of Youth,” Merton Strommen, with *very* broad strokes, and in some cases generalities, tried to identify the underlying motivations if not motifs

of youth – albeit in the 1970's. Mr. Strommen categorized the cries of youth of that generation by writing of the “cry of self-hatred,” “the cry of psychological orphans,” “the cry of social protest,” “the cry of the prejudiced” and ... the “cry of the joyous.”

While my parents knew that I, like all humans, experienced times of sadness and loss, times when I was not as happy as at others, they also knew that I was first and foremost a person who knew joy. I exuded joy. I sang for joy, skied with joy, bicycled with joy, played trains with joy, tormented my brother with joy, drove teachers nuts with unbridled, never quiet joy – and was person of joy! Thirty years ago, my father inscribed these words in the cover of Mr. Strommen's book – “To Ralph whose cry was one of joy” – June 9, 1977.

In the section about the “cry of joy,” the author sets forth three primary characterizations of the joyous: identification with a personal God, an active life with God's people and a motivation to grow and develop. As I look back at my childhood, as my family moved back and forth between the United States and Germany, the one constant besides family itself was *church* – always the same congregation in Fairfax County and an Army Chapel either in Munich or Frankfurt, Germany. The faces changed, the preachers changed, but church, the community of the faithful, and faith itself was part and parcel of family – it was our life's blood. So it is that I can identify with Mr. Strommen's ideas about the “cry of joy.” As I meld his words with mine, we realize that to have an “identification with a personal God” means a move “beyond doctrinal statements” to a “conviction that God hears, cares and forgives,” and that “*oneness with God is a source of joy.*” To be “active with God's people” is to be an active part of a religious community, “eager to help and assist as able, conscious of a moral responsibility and a positive orientation towards” people of all ages. To be “motivated to grow and develop” means wanting to “experience a closer relationship with God and others,” to serve all the more in ministry and mission.

The most important line in all of that is how *oneness with God is a source of joy.* Isaiah, the Psalmists, Mary, John the Baptist, and first and foremost Jesus of Nazareth Whom we call the Christ – they were *one* with God – and were able to look beyond the discomforts if not unhappiness they witnessed in their lives. Isaiah, as I mentioned, did not have an easy time of it. The Psalmists, David and Solomon among them, had moments of sadness if not incredible unhappiness, Mary was ... well, Mary was an unwed, pregnant teenage, in an era when that was a cause for shame, and John the Baptist, well John the Baptist, particularly during the time of which we read this morning could hardly have been a happy man. John was in prison, knew he would never get out, knew that Herodias had pulled strings to get him there, and that she would do everything in her power to silence him forever. John knew that he was on “death row.” John didn't know that he would lose his head . Indeed, Herodias' daughter danced seductively to the point that an intoxicated Herod promised to do whatever she asked, which at her mother's behest, meant the presentation of John's head on a platter.

Did John have cause to a happy man? Probably not, *but he was a man of joy because he was one with his God.* From his prison cell, he asked his disciples to go and find out if his cousin Jesus, the One he had baptized in the River Jordan, if this was indeed the Messiah. Jesus told John's disciples to go back to John and tell him ... well, in typical “Jesus fashion,” Jesus doesn't give a one word answer. Jesus tell John's disciples to tell him that the words of Isaiah, the prophecies of old, the prophecies that compelled *Isaiah* to be a person of joy despite all too many days of unhappiness, the words of Isaiah – and then some! - had come true:

- the blind receive their sight,
- the lame walk,
- lepers are cleansed,
- the deaf hear,
- the dead are raised
- the poor have good news proclaimed to them!

John heard those words from his disciples and his joy was complete. The rest of his life's journey was all too short, it had a bloody end, it was hardly happy – but as with the entirety of his life, his journey, grounded in his faith in his God, was one of *joy*!

I may not be joyous that a mother spent \$1800 on a concert so that her five year old would have the time of her “long” life. I may not be joyous that the Hannah Montana Concert is such a priority in peoples' lives. I do hope that young child, in addition to the material blessings she apparently knows, also has, at the core of her being, the seeds that will help her be one who cries with joy because she knows what comes from a personal relationship with God through Christ, that she knows the joy that comes in the fellowship we have in the ministry and mission that we do.

We are a people of joy because we pursue the ways and dreams of God. No matter the strife, no matter the conflicts, despite the unhappiness that comes from a world that knows war, hunger, thirst, pressing needs, injustice, anything but grace from all much of humanity – the promises of God and advent are ones we embrace, ones for which we work hard, ones which in all circumstances give us joy beyond measure, a joy for the journey that is our way of faith, the way of hope, the way of justice – and the way of love.

Amen.