

## Advent III: Let us Sing for the Joy of God

### Psalm 126

A Season of Singing

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Sunday, December 11, 2005

Worship at 9 and 11 a.m.

Let us take just a moment to present ourselves before God and hear the word that God wants to speak to us. Let us now hear the word that you speak to us gracious Lord, through Jesus Christ. May we hear the good news. It is in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit that we seek to live. Amen

A man had been patiently waiting for spring to come; it had been a very long winter. Rather earnestly, he opened, on that first warm sunny Saturday, the unlocked storm windows and doors and stepped out onto the patio deck. Pleased with sight of green sprouts and singing birds, and delighted more than all else with that sweet aroma of fresh air lingering around him, he knocked on the kitchen window and invited his wife out to join him. He was reminding her of the wonderful scent and fresh clean air that they were breathing when she quietly nudged him and pointed out that he was standing right over the vent of the dryer and was breathing the fabric softener.

Joy comes because God intervenes. Joy is something that is profoundly much deeper than simply breathing-in fresh air. Joy comes because God has done something spectacular in the world. There are many other forms of emotion and celebration but joy comes because of God's special intervention and presence.

I have a long-term ambivalent relationship with joy. I don't know about you, but people who are seemingly joyous all the time make me nervous. It maybe my Pentecostal background where there was too much joy and hype; or my Presbyterian formation, in which the only real person is the stoic person. I don't know. But I'm nervous around people who act joyous, seem joyous, and are seemingly out-of-touch which reality. I resist religious leaders who want to express their joy all the time, on command and demand, as if somehow you can make people joyous. Real people in touch with reality are not in a never-ending state of joy. Joy is a very special event.

Sometimes I thought it might be joy when I was watching my two daughters in their pursuits of sports. My youngest daughter, Tonya, played volleyball. I thought I felt joy when suddenly she would be a quick-set at the net and, rather than hitting with her right hand, her normal hand, she would do a drive down with her left hand, totally shocking the other team. I felt exuberance at that moment. My other daughter, Tamara – who really had a tough time learning how to run, but eventually a coach taught her how to run – became one of the fastest people on the field because she discovered that running was fun. In field hockey she ran with a very big stick; she's such nice person until she picks up that stick. I had joy watching her run and defend the field with that big stick.

But is that joy? Joy on earth is occasional. It is set-off by occasions that follow long winter times of discontent: extended extremities of difficulty; prolonged periods of being in peril; sustained seasons of dissatisfaction. Joy is the response of our human emotions when there is a huge breakthrough that is not created by us, but by God. Joy is the release that God brings when life has been tough. Joy is the restoration and the renewal: the restitution and reclamation that only God can make something happen when all hell is breaking loose.

C.S. Lewis, in his autobiographical book, *Surprised by Joy*, said that he actually invested the early part of his life pursuing joy – as if it was something that could be aesthetically owned and he could experience it if he found the right source of joy. He spent his entire younger years going through World War I, in Oxford and other places, looking for joy. He thought he was on the edge of discovery, and at different times he would experience these primal aesthetic moments where he had good feelings that he thought was joy. But it was a surprise to him when he ultimately discovered that his seeking of joy led beyond joy, to God, who creates the joy.

If you want to be joyous at Christmas, according to C.S. Lewis, then there's only one source: it is to be in the presence of the God about whom Christmas is created and about whom Christmas is flourishing. There is no joy without the presence of God. Joy is a theme that is rehearsed over and over again at Christmas time. You know the Christmas carols: "O Come, All Ye Faithful, Joyful and Triumphant, O Come Ye to Bethlehem." "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the Newborn King; Joyful all Ye Nations Rise, Join the Triumphant of the Skies." "Joy to the World the Lord has Come, Let Earth Receive Her King." One could almost expect that joy is something that you can demand to happen at Christmas.

But it is obvious, when one looks at life, that Christmas time and Thanksgiving time – the Advent season – are one of the least joyous times for most people because we are in touch with the darkest parts of our humanity... our families... and our life experience. The higher the expectations, the less sense of joy will be available to us.

Psalm 126 is about the true nature of joy. Joy is the restoration of God's action when life has been terrible. Joy is God's gift. Rejoicing, in fact, is the remembering process: if I can remember a time when I've had joy and where God has acted, I can rejoice. I can revisit the joy. It's hard to revisit joy that you've never had or experienced. The call of Psalm 126 is that the people of God have had many times of joy in the past. Sometimes we ourselves cannot have that joy but we can lean into other peoples' sense of joy. That's one of the great advantages of being in Christian community. Joy is the sheer ecstasy that God has acted in the past. And rejoicing is the remembering that God has done that; and we can sing and celebrate those past events. Joy is the spontaneous eruption of tears and laughter at a grace that has been experienced. And rejoicing is the remembering and giving thanks for those past experiences where God has been present.

My wife and I wanted to have a theme of joy at our wedding 33 years ago. We ended the service with Ode to Joy by Beethoven. "Joyful, joyful we adore thee, God of Glory, and Lord of Love." Our wedding went on for about hour and a half with all of the music that we had. My uncle turned to my brother at the wedding and said. "You know this wedding is lasting longer than some marriages!" We wanted people to have a sense of joy in remembering the great music that was accessible around weddings because the joy was the sense that God was present. I can remember the feeling, in that event of our wedding, that God was powerfully present. I rejoice in remembering that.

Psalm 126 is really in two parts. It is the remembrance that God in the past has restored Israel. There have been times that we can look back to where God has shown up and made things right. Then it ends with a prayer: Lord, if you could have done this one time or ten times, you can do it again. So bring on your ability to restore; bring on your ability to create water in the desert; to make plants grow out of nothing and seed where there are no seeds, and crops and where there are no crops, and a harvest where there is no harvest. God, you are able to do that because you've done it in the past.

So joy is really in two parts here. It's the rejoicing of the remembrance of what God has done in the past, and the anticipation in prayer that God will do it again. That pattern is a wonderful pattern of singing and celebration – that God is consistently present and will not forget us.

But Psalm 126 is rooted deeply in our current circumstances. In the meantime – that is, in the time of meanness, in the time where we have no real sense of meaning – in this time right now, we do not feel the joy. We do not seem to have the basis for rejoicing. In the meantime what do we do? That's why we have Psalm 126. It's to call our attention to a discipline that the people of God practiced from ancient times on: that we will remember what God has done in the past and rejoice. And we will offer prayers that God will break-in and do it again.

It is an admission that we live in difficult times. It is an affirmation that life can be very dark and painful. We will remember your past actions of restoration, God. We will retell those good stories and we will sing those ancient songs. We will remember and rejoice because we know that your joy will come to us again.

There are some assumptions that are built into life when life is difficult. Lord, we are in trouble here. We have misfortune; we are dying from loss. We are hurting and struggling; we are sowing in tears. We are in the desert; we are losing ground; we have lost hope. We are surrounded by evil; we are desperate. We don't have enough to make it. Lord, hear our prayer. Lord, like the days of the past, help us. We remember when you were here before. We expect that you are going to show up again.

True joy is always accompanied with a sense of the irony of the pain. Tears can be both the tears of pain, and the tears that God has suddenly appeared in the midst of the pain. Rejoicing is always the retelling of the stories when God showed up in the midst of our pain. Joy is the overcoming human emotion of a person who has been through tragedy, terror, or trauma, and has been saved and brought to safety.

Can you think of a time in your life when God showed up and you had a sense of joy? That is the remembrance that you need to pay attention to right now when you're feeling that God is not present. It is the attention that we pay together as a congregation—to look in scripture and see when God has shown up before, so we can celebrate God and the way God has acted in the past.

Pat Conrye in his most recent book, *My Losing Season*, which is an autobiographical rehearsal of his early life as a basketball player, uses this example of his basketball days to deal with his pain around his family, and his father particularly. One of the wonderful moments in his story comes toward the end when one of his basketball teammates is being interviewed by him for this book. He tells him the story of how he was shot down in South Viet Nam. He landed on the ground, unconscious; his neck was broken, his back was broken. But somehow two Viet Cong came up and forced him to walk for the next three months to North Viet Nam and Hanoi. Going through hell for that period of time, only sleeping during the day and walking all night, he finally made it to the prison camp; and there it got worse and not better. It was the community of soldiers in the midst of the camp that brought his dying body back to life. When the Americans were bombing Hanoi to try to catch the attention of the North Vietnamese, the soldiers would sing God Bless America and other hymns and carols in the midst of the bombing, so that they would stay tightly connected to each other. When the release came, he was able to get on a big plane and take off. He tells the story about how all of the men who were on that plane sat in silence until they reached a point where they were no long over Viet Nam but over the water, and then there was a great eruption of joy. There was celebrating; there was screaming and yelling; there was a sense of release and restoration.

That's the joy that only comes out of the most terrible circumstances and that's the joy of Psalm of 126. There is no cheap joy; there is no shallow joy. Joy only comes out of deep pain. Joy only comes out of miraculous intervention. Joy is about life that literally comes out of death. Joy is about salvation that stands in the face of destruction. Joy is not sentimentality; joy is not emotionality or triviality. Joy is not about winning or achievement; joy is all about God. Only God can accomplish some things. When we recognize that, according to C.S. Lewis, we move from being preoccupied with 'let's get joyous' to 'let's know the God who creates joy in us.'

And that's the joy of Christmas; that's the joy of Advent. It's the joy of the presence of God. We are no longer interested in pursuing things for our own feelings, but we are interested in pursuing the God who created us with feeling.

Paul and Silas, according to the book of Acts, chapter 16, were in prison. It was midnight; they had been beaten almost to the point of death and they were singing at midnight. One of the wonderful things about the Psalms is that it says that the nations will hear the rejoicing of the people of God and they will pay attention because it isn't human to rejoice when you are in deep pain. Paul and Silas were singing and the prisoners around them were listening; they couldn't believe their ears. An earthquake happens and, rather than escape, they stay in the prison. The jailor, who also pays attention to what's going on, is amazed that they would be willing to save him. One of the things that joy and rejoicing does is catch other peoples' attention, to the point that they, too, want to know the living God that you know, who's brought you joy.

And so, one of the attributes of the Psalm is: people will see our true joy and they will be attracted to know God. Maturity of faith is when we are able to preserve rejoicing in the midst of the toughest times: to rejoice in the midst of the trouble, even when it's midnight and we have gone through a terrible day. Faith sings and rejoices even when there is no joy. That's why we come to worship. We may come here with all sorts of feelings, ambivalences, and concerns. We may come with no sense of joy – no sense of hope or the presence of God. We practice the discipline of rejoicing because we remember that God has been good in the past. And we can pray for God to be good in the future; but for right now, let's sing.

So we invite each other, in these moments, to rejoice. We invite each other to know Jesus, the Christ, who brings joy in the midst of the toughest times. The Apostle Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice." It isn't that you have to be up and positive all the time. But it means that we practice the remembering and the rejoicing pattern of thinking about what God has done in the past – thinking about who Jesus is and what Jesus has accomplished. Rejoice; practice the discipline; be together and sing when the bombing is happening, and know that God will save his people. Let us rejoice.

Let us pray: O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom your people, captive Israel. We mourn – in a sense of loneliness in exile here – looking for your Son to appear. And so, we rejoice. We rejoice Emmanuel, for you shall come to us, your people, Israel. Amen