

GOOD TIDINGS¹
Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as “Gaudete Sunday.” It comes from the Latin word that means “rejoice.” In the medieval church the first words of the Latin mass on this third Sunday of Advent were *Gaudete in Domino semper*, which is translated “Rejoice in the Lord always.”

That explains why the Advent Wreath has a rose colored candle along with the violet candles surrounding the Christ candle. The rose colored candle is known as the joy candle. It reminds the church that no matter what is happening in your life, the coming of Christ is a time for joy. Or, as the angel said to the shepherds, *I bring you good tidings of great joy....*²

I

Let us be clear about the word “joy.” We are not talking about frivolity or silliness. When we speak of joy we are not talking about Burl Ives singing “Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas,” as much as we enjoy that. It is difficult for many of us to dredge up the frivolity of this holiday when there is so much suffering around us.

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² Luke 2: 10.

I was saddened this week when I heard about the death of the actor, Harry Morgan, who played Colonel Potter on M*A*S*H. Here was a show set in the middle of the Korean War as a satire on the tragedy of war itself. Colonel Potter was the commander of an army field hospital, and the show used comedy as a way to deal with the tragedies of severely wounded soldiers constantly being evacuated from the front lines and brought to the field hospital for surgery.

In one episode, Colonel Potter and Hawkeye, the character played by Alan Alda, are standing over another mutilated body on the surgical table, and Colonel Potter says, "By the way, what war is this?" To which Hawkeye replies, "The latest war to end all wars." That show ended its eleven-year run in 1983, and since then how many of those years have we seen mutilated soldiers sent to the operating table?

This is the time of year when many people pull out the old Jimmy Stewart movie, "It's a Wonderful Life." At one point in the movie, George Bailey, the character played by Jimmy Stewart, is at the end of his rope, ready to give up. He is thinking, "Given all that's bad and uncertain in the world and in my own situation, how can anyone say, 'It's a wonderful life?'" God knows the world has enough tragedy in it to banish joy forever.

But then we encounter this scripture from Isaiah that speaks of God providing for those who mourn, giving them a *garland instead of ashes*. It speaks of the *oil of gladness* and a *mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit*.

These are images that must have seemed as strange and out of place as joy seems to many in our world who have reached the end of their rope. The people to whom these words were originally directed had lost their homes and lost their freedom. They had become slaves in a foreign land. They were on the verge of losing all hope.

When they were finally set free to go back to their homes, they found their homes in ruins. They were brokenhearted; they felt defeated; they had all but given up. It is to these people that the prophet says, *The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...comfort for all who mourn...and to give them the oil of gladness!*

Centuries later, Jesus would draw from this very passage to describe his own ministry,³ and there is a sense in which this passage provides a blueprint for the type of ministry that God's people are called upon to provide in every age.

³ Luke 4: 16-21.

III

So even in dark times, the darkest time of the year, we still light the candle of joy. Why? Because God still anoints us to bring good news to the poor; because God still beckons us to bring release to the captives of whatever enslaves them; because God still offers recovery of sight to the blind and sets at liberty those who are oppressed.

Somehow, when that truth sinks into our souls, we suddenly GET IT! The great sweep of the biblical story is all about hope in the darkest of times leading to nothing less than joy! Abraham moves out into a new land in hope; Moses leads a people from slavery to promise; Isaiah promising the *oil of gladness instead of mourning*; and a baby being born in Bethlehem. It is all part of the great sweep of hope leading to joy.

When Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph were still in danger, without adequate medical care, far from home, with no one to turn to. Matthew tells of the brutal slaughter of children by a ruthless king.⁴ Hope had been born in Jesus, but his family still became refugees in Egypt until Herod died. This is contemporary reality for many in the world. Yet hope was born in Bethlehem!

⁴ Matthew 2: 16-18.

So as we get closer and closer to Christmas, I encourage you to look at your life with new hope. Look at your church with fresh hope. Imagine what new thing God is about to do, what new gift is about to be born.

One of our favorite Christmas carols speaks of “a cold winter’s night that was so deep.”⁵ So deep? What could that mean? Maybe it means that they were in deep trouble. Maybe it calls to anyone who is in deep trouble, anyone who is in too deep, anyone who deeply worries, anyone who is deeply hopeless. For in that deep, deep darkness, God broke through with hope leading to actual joy.

That joy described in beautiful and evocative poetic images of angels and singing and a special star lighting the heavens and poor shepherds and wise men and Joseph and Mary in awe over the hope created in the baby. It is a story that is deeper than mere facts, a story that will never die, a story that we can celebrate no matter how bogged down we get in the harsh realities of today’s troubles.

IV

In Emily Dickenson’s famous poem about hope, she compares hope to

...a thing with feathers
that perches in the soul
and sings the tune—without the words,

⁵ “The First Nowell.”

and never stops at all.⁶

In Advent we can feel the feathers of hope flutter in our soul, and then on Christmas that bird of hope soars so high that no matter what is happening in our lives, we can still lift our voices and sing “Joy to the World!”

⁶ Emily Dickenson, “Hope.”