

Joy Intrudes

A Reflection for the Christmas Eve Communion (Late Service)
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Luke 2:1-20

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“Good tidings of great joy.”

The angel brings to those shepherds. Good news that will move them to.

What is this joy? Can it live inside us, today?

Let me offer some pictures of joy.

- A toddler being lifted in the air and coming down, and lifted again and coming down, and lifted again and coming down, all the while squealing and giggling. That’s joy.
- Walking home after your first kiss, with the one you would one day marry. That’s joy.
- Those scenes in airports of people coming into the arrivals area and being greeted by family members they have not seen for years, maybe decades. One sticks with me of a brother and sister who had been separated during the Holocaust. Each thought the other had perished. By a strange circumstance, or grace, they were now reunited. They were old, and did not have a lot of physical energy for the reunion. So theirs was a quiet . . . sigh . . . joy.

In moments of joy, everything is well. Nothing else is needed. It is complete and enough. We don’t experience joy on the way to something else. Joy itself is the top of the mountain. We can go no further, and we do not need to.

What’s a time when you have experienced what you would describe as “joy”?

II

Is joy a type, a species of happiness? A sort of “super happiness”? Sure. But I wonder if there is an important difference between joy and happiness.

There was a survey done a few years ago. It was called the *Oxford Happiness Questionnaire*.¹ It gives you twenty-nine statements you respond to, either agreeing or disagreeing to various degrees. Things like:

- I rarely wake up feeling rested.
- Life is good.
- I do not think that the world is a good place.
- I feel that I am not especially in control of my life.
- I laugh a lot.

¹ www.meaningandhappiness.com/oxford-happiness-questionnaire/214/

You give your answers to each of these statements, and figure out your score. I scored 3.4. The average person scores 4. So I am slightly below average in my happiness. That sounds about right. I live with depression. Sometimes I'm good, other times I'm struggling. Most of the time, I'm in the middle.

If I'm to experience joy, should I work at increasing my "happiness" score?

That would not hurt, but I don't think that is how joy works. Joy can fill us, even when we are not happy.

Notice that, in the survey I mentioned, happiness had a lot to do with how we feel about ourselves and the world around us, including other people. If you feel good about these things, you are going to be happy. If not, then not-so-happy.

With joy, it's quite different.

Joy does not come from inside you. Joy does not come from how the world normally is or how I think about myself. Joy is a delightful intrusion. Joy intrudes into how things normally are.

Joy is a blessed interruption. Even in the midst of unhappiness — unhappiness with ourselves, unhappiness with our world — joy shows up.

III

We have got those shepherds on the hillside. If you were a shepherd, life was tough. You were poor, didn't have much to your name, and lived on the margins of the community. People looked down on you. Maybe you looked down on yourself. I'm not saying they didn't have moments of laughter. But if happiness is determined by your circumstances, they had a lot to be unhappy about.

They are settling in for the night, when this angel, this messenger of God interrupts them. Interrupts them with joy. I cannot order myself, "Be joyful." It doesn't work that way. Something needs to cause joy.

Those shepherds, their joy springs out of this good news the angel delivers them. Good news about a delivery, in Bethlehem, that very day. A baby born. The Baby born. The Christ, the Messiah, the King, the Lord who will deliver His people, who is the Saviour.

Jesus is an intrusion, God's intrusion, into the world of unhappiness. We are stuck in the same old story, stuck telling tales of woe. God interrupts! Unto you. "Unto you is born today the Saviour, Christ the Lord." To you! For you!

IV

“Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!”

Does that sound foreign to you, out of reach?

Then draw closer, to behold.

The Creator of the Cosmos, cradled in a creche.

God himself, taking on our flesh.

Absolute power, embracing weakness.

Perfect wholeness, to be torn by suffering.

The One who is everywhere, and beyond everywhere, being born in one place.

For us. For you.

Joy.

Strange, yes! So draw closer.

Pure goodness,

and so he became a friend to tax collectors and prostitutes.

Totally innocent,

and so he became counted among the condemned.

The Giver of Life itself,

and so he submitted to death, and sprang forth with resurrection.

For us. For you.

Joy.

Wonderful counsellor,

the One whose plans and purposes are delightful.

Mighty God,

dancing in the life of the Trinity.

Everlasting Father,

who became our brother.

Prince of Peace,

that we may be at peace.

Joy.

Joy intrudes. Joy interrupts.

Christ the Saviour is born. Amen.