

“Inseparable Joy”

Rev. David Gregory

December 15, 2019

Advent 3



First Reading

Isaiah 9:2-3 (New Standard Revised Version)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest.

Second Reading

excerpted from *On Joy and Sorrow* by Kahlil Gibran

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say, “Joy is greater than sorrow,” and others say, “Nay, sorrow is the greater.”

But I say unto you, they are inseparable. together they come, and when one sits, alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

This morning I bring you good tidings of great joy, from this beautiful threshold we call Advent. It may feel like the threshold has more to do with a Christmas concert than anything else. It certainly feels that way at my house right now. We’ve been kind of living on that threshold for weeks now. And its going to be wonderful. We’ll enjoy it, and then, like all events, it will be over. And then we’ll find ourselves in the next present moment, the next place of simply being, the place where, as we keep saying, the distant past and the endless future rush to meet one another. This place where we dwell, this present moment, may seem filled with joy or sorrow,

laughter or anger, light or shadow, and if you are conscious of all of these being held in the present moment, then you are very much on the right track.

Ancient times were another series of present moments, and for Hebrew prophets like Isaiah, who lived five or six centuries before Jesus, the present moment carried the same message that it did when Jesus was born, and it is the same message for us today.

We are living in difficult times. The oppression of vulnerable peoples, the way tyrants act with seeming impunity, the terrible injustices that go unchecked—these are just a few of the common themes that course through human history. But where Isaiah was concerned, the Babylonian captors were themselves conquered by the Persians, who allowed the Jews to return and rebuild their temple. And later, it was Rome that fell. These powerful, threatening, violent regimes did not ultimately stand. The injustices of our day also will not stand. And there will be an increase of joy—joy like in a harvest. Humanity, in its evolutionary spiral will always cycle there.

We recently celebrated a bountiful harvest, and we did so with great gusto. Some of you may have seen a photo that was posted on our Facebook page of the lines of people coming down both sides of the food table. The first thing you notice in that photo are the mountains of food which are lovely, but the really interesting feature is the expressions on all of the faces. There is something joyful about knowing that there is plenty to be had. It speaks to our comfort, our nourishment, our security, our hope. And when it's all laid out in a feast in what my Quaker grandmother used to call an "embarrassment of riches," there is a feeling of great joy. But the joy does not enter the room alone; it comes with its companion called sorrow. And were it not for sorrow, we'd never know what joy is. Were it not for joy, we'd never know what sorrow is.

Enter Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese American writer and poet of the early 20th century. As we, in Jungian fashion, remind ourselves that there is no light without shadow, we have this beautiful teaching that joy and sorrow are inseparable. It may seem like we're dumping ice water over this fun little Christmas party, but it's not like that. In this candle of Joy today, we're getting at the very root of all of it.

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Seriously? When I hear something like this, I'm often transported to what was beyond a shadow of a doubt the darkest time in my life, a period in the past which is so basic to who I am and why I am even here, doing what I'm doing. It was 24 years ago next month, as I traveled from upstate New York to Christ Hospital in Cincinnati to sit in a waiting room as my mother underwent a massive eight-hour cancer surgery. Seated next to me, dazed and confused, was

my father who was well into Alzheimer's disease. My sister and I did our best to keep him occupied, with little success. It was the sheer length of the surgery that told us what we needed to know. Everything was grim. Afterward there was chemotherapy, the kind that made my mother unrecognizable; a few months of remission, and a little more chemo, until she made the choice to discontinue it. She died on the eve of my 41st birthday, and it was all just awful.

I had grieved before, but never to this degree. For a while I did a once monthly ritual of pouring a glass of whisky and listening to the memorial service again. There was no one there to tell me not to. Then I reread the cards and letters that were written, just going over and over it all in my head. For a good long time, I could not speak of my mother without weeping. It was actually several years later that I noticed that a memory of her made me chuckle. She had the greatest sense of humor, and eventually I could talk about her and laugh. She wasn't perfect, but she was awesome.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

In Stone Soup this week, Jennifer spoke of a particular sorrow in her life, and that's what started me down this path. Often we scold ourselves, thinking we're indulging in feelings that are better abandoned in favor of something more positive. But our sorrow is only happening because of the joy we have had. Think about that. This makes our joy something far greater, and far deeper than the kind of happiness we possess when things are going our way, so to speak. It is joy in the context of sorrow, and sorrow in the context of joy. And both equally come with us to inhabit the threshold of the present moment. Neither needs to be described, explained, or even fixed. They just are. They are here. They are ours, and they are now. And there is a sort of perfect freedom in the acknowledgement of this truth. It is the freedom to find joy in a world that is imperfect.

When bad actors on the world stage are acting imperfectly, they can give me cause for great concern, but they cannot be permitted to take my joy from me. In fact, they do not have that power. Like a Hebrew prophet, I can lift my voice and cry out toward an unjust world, but my inner life is mine, and in my grief and sorrow and even anger, I choose joy. This is not a formula for making the sorrow and anger leave. They are necessary. Otherwise this candle of joy would be utterly meaningless.