

Psalms 46; Isa. 43: 1-7; John 14: 1-3, 25-27; Phil. 4: 4-8

### **“How can we enjoy our lives when the news headlines bring despair?”**

You have to imagine that every once in a while the disciples got incredibly frustrated with Jesus. Like in our reading today from John. It's the night of Jesus' arrest, the eve of the crucifixion, and Jesus has just told the disciples that he's leaving and they can't follow him. Then he says, "But do not let your hearts be troubled." Don't you think their reaction was the first century equivalent of, "Gimme a break!"

That's certainly our twenty-first century reaction. Do not let our hearts be troubled? Are you kidding? Look around! Economic woes. Gridlock in Washington. Seemingly endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Refugees pouring out of Syria. Political fights over immigration, health care, the reform of our financial system. Gun violence in our country. ISIS and al Qaeda terrorist violence in Kabul and London. North Korean missile launches. Russia and Turkey taking giant strides backward toward repressive regimes. Frightening divisions between races, communities, conservatives and liberals, haves and have nots. And we're not supposed to be troubled?

Yet on the night when he will be handed over to those who will execute him, Jesus not only experiences peace but gives it to others. And when Paul wrote to the Philippians exhorting them to be joyful and blessing them with peace, he himself was confined to a Roman prison cell under the sentence of death. He knew about hard times and bedlam. He was not peddling empty hope or a Pollyanna type of religion in his dire situation, writing to people in their own. When he wrote "rejoice in the Lord always," and "the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" he was not writing about feelings that denied the painful realities of life, but rather peace and joy that existed in the midst of them. For this joy and peace are not based on the realities of the world and the circumstances of life; but on the presence of the living Christ.

A state of joy and peace is not something that can be easily explained. It is something that is experienced, and it is an experience that transforms us. Happiness, on the other hand, is easy to explain because it depends upon a variety of conditions, such as your physical health, your financial security, your getting along with the people in your life, your perception of the relative harmony and security of our society and world.

But peace and joy, in contrast, only have one condition. In the words of Episcopalian preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor: "The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, and in an intensive care waiting room. Joy doesn't happen when we get what we want. It is much more likely to happen when we do not get what we want; only we have a hard time seeing that until our own wishes have crashed and burned. It is there, in the wilderness, in that empty-handed, I-give-up surrender, that joy is most likely to occur. And that is how you know God is present—because no one else knows how to make life out of death. No one else knows how to come into a dark room and turn on all the lights, surprising everyone inside with the last thing any of them ever expected: pure, unkillable joy."

‘Rejoice in the Lord,’ Paul said. ‘My peace I give to you,’ Jesus said. Real and lasting peace and joy come from the confidence that, no matter what happens, we are inseparably connected to God and saved in Jesus Christ. It has to do with where the focus, the center, the foundation of our life is or, to employ a famous phrase by Paul Tillich, with our “ultimate concern.”

Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote, “The person with the clear head is the one who frees himself and looks life in the face, realizes that everything in it is problematic, and feels himself lost. As this is the simple truth — that to live is to feel oneself lost — he who accepts it has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground. Instinctively, as do the shipwrecked, he will look round for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere, because it is a question of his salvation, will cause him to bring order into the chaos of his life.”

And so crisis can be opportunity. Life’s stumbling blocks can be stepping stones. What would otherwise break us merely makes us stronger. Victor Frankl, writing about the Nazi concentration camps in his book “Man’s Search for Meaning” says “it is just such an exceptionally difficult external situation which gives humans the opportunity to grow spiritually beyond themselves...an accomplishment which in ordinary circumstances they would have never achieved.” And many of us gathered here today know personally, that through losses, disappointments, accidents, hardships, health issues, and troubled relationships we have not been diminished, embittered, or destroyed but rather have grown stronger, more loving, more fully alive, and closer to God.

“We do not lose heart,” Paul writes the Corinthians in his second letter. “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

In a Christmas meditation Brennan Manning calls us “the shipwrecked at the stable” for we are “the poor in spirit who feel lost in the cosmos, adrift on an open sea, battered by wind and rain, clinging with a life-and-death desperation to the one solitary plank. Yet we accept the truth about ourselves—shipwrecked and saved—our lives are henceforth anchored in the rock who is Christ, not in the shifting sands of our fickle feelings. Circumstances can play havoc with our emotions, the day can be stormy or fair and our feelings fluctuate accordingly; but if we are in Christ, we are in peace and there unflustered even when we feel no peace.”

We cannot generate freedom from anxiety by our own efforts; the attempt only pushes the anxiety underground, where it festers and leads to secret despair. Or as Jesus warns us in a parable he told, we simply drive one demon from our house when we sweep it clean only to leave it empty so the demon comes back and invites other demons to join him. Peace and joy, as we mentioned, are gifts from God that come with an assurance, an experience of God’s presence.

Nearly 400 years ago, the French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, wrote down on a piece of paper: “In the year of grace 1654, Monday, 23 November ... from about half-past ten in the evening till about half an hour after midnight. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of

Jacob. Not of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Joy! Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy. My God. Let me not be separated from thee forever.” Pascal carried that piece of paper with him for the rest of his life. It was found on his person when he died.

Some years ago Jeremy was in a Cardiac ICU in a major hospital having undergone surgery to save his life. Later he reported about the night after surgery when he lay awake, fearing that his life was about to end, and reflecting on what it had and had not been; reflecting on all the things he had gotten and had lost, all the pain he had suffered and had unfairly inflicted upon others. He said he lay there asking himself, amid all his accomplishments and acquisitions, what had been the one thing in his life he had always sought but could never find. "The answer," he said, "was easy. The one thing I had never been able to locate was Peace."

The next morning a chaplain making rounds visited with him for a few moments, but prior to leaving he said, "May I share a brief passage from the Bible with you, and offer a prayer." The chaplain proceeded to open his Bible and read the words from Christ: "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives, do I give it to you." The words struck Jeremy like a spiritual hammer. He suddenly got it--that if he turned to Jesus, really got to know him, he would experience peace. "And that," Jeremy said, "turned out to be the case."

God may come more like a bolt of lightning, or a spiritual hammer blow, making his presence, love, and promises known and blessing us with peace and joy. And yet we know that ordinarily it is through worship, prayer, reflection, Bible study, Christian fellowship, service with those in need that we actually open our hearts, minds, and lives to the living Christ, who enters by the Spirit and blesses us with abounding joy and that peace that passes understanding.

Since we are beset with anxieties that get in the way of rejoicing, Paul tells us to pray in everything, bringing everything, no matter how trivial or how insurmountable, to the God who loves us, is with us, and has saved us in Christ. And Christ will meet us at the place of worry, because Christ has descended to the depths of human despair. And God's peace will "guard" our minds and hearts.

And Paul tells us to focus our minds on what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. Apart from the resurrection this would just be an exercise in positive thinking and denial of hard realities. But Paul is holding two realities in view at the same time. Yes, there is the immediate reality of a world in which human beings are constantly at war, hurting each other, and so forth. This was true of the Roman Empire, and it is true today. But Paul sees another reality. That is the reality of God's kingdom of love, justice, abundance, and peace, already here and still drawing near. Training our minds to think of this reality, and thereby to act with hope, is a daily mental and spiritual discipline.

Rather than looking as we are trained to do, for "what is wrong with the picture," look for what is good, true, and of God. Look for God in the person who sits and listens with his or her heart when you need to pour out yours. Look for God in hope that grows out of ashes. Look for God in the growth and peace that comes to some who have been through dark valleys. Look for God in the laughs of small children and in the confidence of youth. Look for God as Mr. Rogers told

us, “in the good people who rush in” where an evildoer, a natural disaster, or human accident has caused pain and loss.

Peace and joy are gifts of God that we receive more fully when we give over to God a certain amount of control of all the things that we worry about and fear. Not that we surrender responsibility, but rather that we recognize there are limits to what we can affect or achieve on our own, and sensing those limits, we place ourselves, our loved ones, our country and our world in God’s hands.