12-9/10-17 Rev. Amy Haines

1 Thess 5:16-24 Joy is Our True Home Advent “Coming Home”

Have you ever turned on the radio in December and when the song “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” came on, you thought to yourself, *bah humbug*!

December can be a stressful month, especially if you are trying to find the right gift and attend all of the extra festivities and bake special recipe cookies and try to do all that and more without going into too much debt or getting sick due to exhaustion. Add a layer of grief to that mix, as our Stephen Ministers have mentioned, and sometimes just trying to get through the day is an accomplishment.

I confess that I found myself a bit too stressed this past week when I thought about all I still had to do in the next week, including details for Christmas Eve services and January newsletter and today’s sermon and shopping for triple birthdays and Christmas and finish decorating and …

So one night I came home and did nothing but set up most of my nativities, because it was something I could do and feel a sense of accomplishment without too much stress. (Ask me later if you want to know how many nativities and holy families I now own.)

Placing baby Jesus in the manger, with magi and shepherds there to worship, followed by a good night’s sleep, grounded me once again in the reason for the season.

It also reminded me that Mary and Joseph’s journey was not an easy one. They had to overcome scorn and shame and disappointment in their hometown as they were not yet wed when Mary became pregnant with the Son of God. They had to endure a forced migration to Bethlehem for the government census at a time that was very inconvenient and uncomfortable for Mary. By the time they arrived, many of their relative’s homes were full to overflowing. So they traveled from house to house to find someone who could house them. Finally, they were offered a corner of a manger, housed with the animals, yet at least they could be together. Jesus was born, the angels rejoiced, then they settled for a while in Bethlehem until the King threatened death upon their son, and they fled to Egypt until King Herod’s death. Finally, years after they left, they returned to Nazareth. Time and again an unexpected journey for the holy family, yet every step of the way they rejoiced that God was with them.

They were not the first of God’s people --nor were they the last—who have not had an easy journey. Over the past two weeks we have reflected through the psalms of the time when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was wiped off the map by the Assyrians and the Southern Kingdom of Judah was carried off into exile by the Babylonians. God allowed such calamities to happen because God’s people had turned so far away from God. Yet when they repented, when all they had left to cling to was their faith, God restored a remnant to the Promised Land, and reminded them that they still were God’s people.

With such restoration came an invitation to renew their faith and trust in Almighty God.

And when they agreed, they gave thanks, rejoicing in God’s abundant love and forgiving grace.

Psalm 126 captures some of that joy:

1When the Lord changed Zion’s circumstances for the better,  
    it was like we had been dreaming.  
**2**Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter;  
    our tongues were filled with shouts of joy.  
It was even said, at that time, among the nations,  
    “The Lord has done great things for them!”  
**3**Yes, the Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

**4**Lord, change our circumstances for the better,   
    like dry streams in the desert waste!  
**5**Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with shouts of joy.  
**6**Let those who go out, crying and carrying their seed,  
    come home with shouts of joy, carrying bales of grain! (CEB)

Claiming our place as God’s people does not always mean joy at a change in circumstance. Yet it does mean that we can trust that no matter what our circumstances, God is with us.

In today’s Scripture from Paul’s letter to the early church at Thessalonica, they, too, are struggling to stand firm in their faith journey. They have heard and believe in the good news of Jesus. Yet like many Christians in the first century, not only did they face ridicule and scorn, they also faced a crisis of faith when faithful loved ones began to die before Christ had returned in glory.

How do they rejoice while suffering? How do they adjust their belief in Jesus’ second coming at a time different than what they expect? What do they do in the waiting? These are questions Paul sought to address in his writing.

In the chapter preceding today’s Scripture, Paul encouraged the early believers not to grieve as those who had no hope. As believers in Jesus who died and rose again, those who died ahead of them will also be raised.

In the verses preceding today’s Scripture, Paul encouraged the early believers to stand fast in faith, for no one will know when the day of the Lord will come. Nowadays we have those who will predict the end of the world, or predict Christ’s coming, with regularity. Yet each time when we wake up the next morning, unchanged, they have to admit they are wrong. Only God knows the day of Jesus’ coming, and since we are still here today, I consider that a gift of grace.

Verses 9-11 proclaim, “For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” (NRSV)

What Paul proclaims to the early church also rings true for those of us still here today, over 2000 years later, as we await Christ’s second coming. Are we simply to sit back and wait, praying Christ will come again tomorrow? No. Are we to give up when life is full of ups and downs, and when our faith journeys include times of doubt and faith, despair and hope? No.

Are we to guess at the time and hour of Christ’s return or be ready today in case tomorrow never comes?

This season of Advent reminds us to be ready now, for we are not promised tomorrow.

Even now, Paul reminds us, we are called to live in active waiting, in eager anticipation for Christ’s coming, however long that will take. And even now, we are called by God to come home. For even now, as we await Christ’s second coming, we celebrate that at Christmas Jesus arrived as Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus through his life, his death and his resurrection invites us home to a relationship with Almighty God.

Home to God’s arms of love. Home to God’s forgiving grace. Home to God’s abiding joy.

Joy is our true home, the joy of knowing God through faith in Jesus.

This joy is not…

Happiness, the denial of reality or found in material things.

Joy found in the stuff of our lives is fleeting, for fire and flood and foreclosure can remove all we own in a moment’s notice. Joy that denies reality is a false joy, like a fake smile that hides the hurt and pain within us. Joy is not happiness, for we can still have joy in the midst of some of the toughest circumstances of our lives when we are anything but happy.

This joy is …

the blessed assurance of God, who was and who is and who will always be, an invitation to be in relationship with God, through faith in Jesus, even though we don’t deserve such a loving relationship, and the promise that God is still bigger than all our struggles, and bigger even then death.

Pastor Marvin McMickle once learned the truth about joy from his wife, and shared her story with her blessing. He said,

..“Late last year, [my wife] Peggy and I sat in a doctor’s office where we talked about how to treat the breast cancer with which she had just been diagnosed.

It was surprising and unsettling enough that she was diagnosed with cancer just a few years after I had gone through a battle with prostate cancer. However, life was not through with us so far as surprises were concerned. Later that afternoon, while we were away from the house, Peggy’s mother fell while coming down the stairs. She had been doing so well in recent weeks, but now was bed-ridden with a fractured pelvis.

Wanting to comfort Peggy, I remarked how ironic it seemed that, on the week when our faith directs us to the word of joy [during the Advent season] she had so much hardship and stress placed upon her. I thought maybe she would break down and cry; instead she said, ‘Oh, I still have my joy’.”

That response reminded him of a gospel song that proclaims, “After all I’ve been through, I still have joy.”

He went on to proclaim:

..“That is what separates joy from the false gods of happiness, pleasure and thrills. When you have joy, the devil can throw everything he has against you and you just keep on pushing-not because you are that strong, but because God is bigger than anything that life can do to you.”

--Marvin McMickle “After All I’ve Been Though I Still Have Joy” preaching.com:joy

True joy is our home. Not the joy of parties and presents, but the joy of God’s promises and presence. This is the joy proclaimed by angels on that long ago night. This is the joy that compelled shepherds travel into town and wise men to travel from afar.

And when we abide in such joy, we are responding through faith to all that God has said and done throughout the ages, in our lives today, and promises into the future. When we abide in such joy, we live into what we proclaim every time we gather at Christ’s table. *Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.* This is not passive waiting; this is Advent expectation!

So in this season of Advent, wherever we may find ourselves on the journey of faith, we are invited to follow Paul’s instructions for faithful living:

Rejoice always

Pray continually

Give thanks in all circumstances

For this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

Do this in response to God’s presence and promises. Do this always, not just sometimes, not just when you feel like it, not just when you are happy, but also when you are clinging to life by your fingertips.

Rejoice always

Pray continually

Give thanks in all circumstances

For this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

When we follow Paul’s instruction, then we continually ground ourselves in God. When we continually ground ourselves in God, then we shift from living by our own desires to living for God’s desires. And then our thankfulness moves from being thankful for what we have in life to being thankful for God’s presence in our lives.

Rejoice always

Pray continually

Give thanks in all circumstances

For this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

..In the third-century, a man anticipating death penned these last words to a friend:

"It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not.

They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians--and I am one of them."

*-*adapted from *Today In The Word*, June, 1988, p. 18. Sermonillustrations.com:joy

..In the early 1700s, there was a man who was often sick as a baby. He was always small, even puny. As a youth he was unable to play sports with boys his age because he was frail and delicate. As a young man we entered the ministry, yet due to his fragile health, was unable to serve his growing congregation. Amazingly, he did not dwell on his troubles. In fact, his spirit soared. Unable to serve his congregation, he turned to hymn writing after having complained about the poor quality of hymns in his day, with few songs conveying hope and joy. This man went on to write over 600 hymns of praise before his health collapsed in 1748, one of the most remarkable collections known to the world.

The name of this preacher turned hymn writer? Isaac Watts. And we began the service today with one of his most famous hymns, “Joy to the World.”

Isaac Watts discovered joy in his life because he knew that God would never desert him. He was able to live his life with all sorts of health problems feeling close to God and Jesus. He had joy deep in his heart.

-adapted from Timothy J. Smith via Sermons.com newsletter on preaching.com:joy

Whether you continue through this December saying *bah humbug* or *Merry Christmas*,

singing *I’ll have a blue Christmas without you* or *Good Christian Friends, Rejoice*,

may you find joy as your true home-

The joy of coming home to faith in Jesus

The joy of knowing you are forgiven and freed for life now and for all eternity

The joy of trusting God’s promises and God’s presence.

As Timothy Merrill once said,

“Drop your search for joy. Know God and you'll get joy thrown in for free.”

“Discover God and joy cannot be far behind.”

--Timothy Merrill “Designing for Joy” on The Back Page Nov/Dec 2017 homileticsonline.com

Rejoice, sisters and brothers, rejoice, pray and give thanks, trusting in God’s Spirit to guide you now and forevermore.

Let us pray.