

JOY: IT'S NOT AN EMOTION. IT'S A LOCATION.

Advent 3: Go and tell
Luke 1:46-55; Isaiah 35:1-10

The authors of the Declaration of Independence
said it's self-evident that every human being
has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I believe they were right.

They just didn't *realize* that after we got rid of the British,
and were free to pursue happiness
whenever and wherever we wanted,
that 235 years later we *still* weren't *finding* it.

Americans are *not* a very happy people, all things *considered*.
Even in the middle of this joyous season.

Social scientists have done serious *studies* of happiness.

They have found that
youth and old age are the happiest times in a person's life.
They found scientific proof that money does *not* buy happiness.
Lottery winners, after a *year*, are no happier than before.
And people disabled in an accident,
in *time*, become almost as happy again.
They found that having pets makes people happier,
whereas, having children generally doesn't.

Social scientists rank countries by their level of happiness.

The U.S.—even though it's right at the top,
in terms of power, wealth, health, and education—
is now #20 in happiness.

Some of the countries that are *happier* than we are?
Mexico. Colombia.

Iceland, and nearly every *other* country near the Arctic.
#1 happy country in the world right now? Costa Rica.

So perhaps we Americans are *especially* in need
of this third Sunday of Advent—"Joy Sunday."

Each year the scriptures on this Sunday
have something to do with the joy of God's salvation.
When God moves in to save,

all creation seems to erupt in spontaneous expressions of joy.

According to Isaiah 35,

the land *itself* is joyful:

(v. 1) "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing."

Creatures once impaired, now dance.

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert . . .

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return . . .
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads . . .
sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

Why?

Because, (v. 2) they "see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God."

And in the marvelous Magnificat, Mary's song,
which we come back to on this Sunday every Advent,
the same thing happening to Mary.

She gets a glimpse of God's salvation,
and she erupts in joyful song:

"My spirit rejoices in God my Savior!"

She rejoices because she sees God moving in,
acting to save the downtrodden,
and put the proud in their place.

God is at work, to fill the hungry,
and send the rich away empty.

This very text is being read all over the world today,
in some of the finest cathedrals.

I'm guessing dozens of presidents and prime ministers,
billionaire CEO's of multi-national corporations,

are sitting in a church somewhere this morning,
while someone is reading or singing these exact words:
“God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.”

These rich and powerful worshipers
are probably wearing polite smiles,
but whether or not they are happy, or joyful, I don't *know*.

This is the song of a young and frightened girl
from a back-woods area of a puny little country
that was being occupied and oppressed.
And she is singing about all of that being turned upside-down.
The powerful being brought down.
And the powerless—*her* people—being elevated.
The hungry being filled,
and the rich going hungry.
She is speaking not only for *herself*,
having just been given the news
that she would give birth to the Messiah,
but she is speaking for *all* the little, insignificant people.
She is saying, *our time has come!*
God has looked on us with favor.
God has intervened and is turning things upside down.

Kind of strange, when you think about it,
from what depressed parts of the world,
and from what oppressed segments of society,
joy can come bubbling up so quickly and easily.
Any of you who have traveled to developing countries
have certainly witnessed this phenomenon.
Any of you who saw media coverage of church services in Haiti
after the devastating earthquake,
have seen it.
Where people of faith in desperate circumstances
find themselves completely and utterly at God's mercy,
you will hear honest cries for help, no *doubt*,

and loud lamentations.
But you will *also* hear heartfelt songs of joy,
praising God for God's saving power.

How can this *be*?
It can't be a result of feeling good about the situation they're in.

You know *Mary* wasn't singing this exuberant song
because she was *thrilled* about being stuck in the middle
of one of the most socially humiliating and disgraceful
circumstances that could possibly befall
a good Jewish teenage girl—
pregnancy out of wedlock.

You know that the people of *Israel* Isaiah was speaking to,
weren't overflowing in praise to the God
who makes the blind see, and the lame dance,
and the desert bloom,
because of what they were experiencing right *then*—
with King Sennacharib,
and the armies of Assyria laying siege to their cities
and crushing them underfoot.

This is where it's so crucial for us to reflect on what joy really *is*;
to think about what it really means, in a deeper way,
to pursue happiness.

Is our aim, in our search for joy or happiness,
to achieve a certain emotional high?
Is it our goal to feel good about our life circumstances?
Is it even accurate to *call* joy, in the *biblical* sense, an emotion?

Sure, joy often is accompanied by a strong emotional sense
of well-being, of contentment, of peace.
But if deep spiritual joy is our goal
then we might just miss it altogether
if “feeling good” is what we're aiming at.
God *wants* us to live in fullness of joy.

But joy is not an emotion. It's a location.

It's all about where we locate ourselves.

Or, like I said last Sunday,
it's about which image of human flourishing
we are choosing as our guiding image.

God is a joy-full God . . .

Want some evidence?

Remember the three parables in Luke,
about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son?
These were parables about life in God's kingdom,
and how God responds when someone is lost,
and then returns to kingdom life.

God parties!

God goes *overboard* in expressing his joy.
God kills the fatted calf and puts on a lavish feast.

God's main agenda in the universe is restoring shalom—
restoring wholeness and peace.

Healing, reconciling, redeeming what is lost.

Wherever and whenever shalom breaks out,

God is overcome with joy and delight.

Deuteronomy 30 says the people of God wandered in sin,
and suffered,

but the tide changed when they returned to God, and it says,
"The Lord will again take delight in prospering you,
just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors."

Jesus demonstrated God's joyful character

when he lived his life among us in joyful abandon,
turning water into wine,
going to dinner parties with tax collectors,
picking grain on the Sabbath,
letting women and lepers touch him.

He *ignored* the scowls and wrinkled foreheads of the Pharisees.

When those who were lost or sick or blind
were restored, *I* think Jesus laughed right out loud.

He might have fallen off his *chair* laughing,
when Zacchaeus announced to everyone after dinner,
that he would give half his possessions to the poor,
and pay back everyone he cheated
four times as much as he took from them.

Joy is not found by pursuing joy for its own sake.

Joy is found when we locate ourselves in God,
in the kingdom of shalom that God is creating.

Joy *cannot* be pursued for its own sake,
as if joy *itself* were the prize.

Joy is *not* the prize.

Life in God is the prize.

And joy is the *character* of that life.

Our culture, maybe human nature *itself*,

tells us to run from any pain and suffering in life.

But when we locate ourselves in the life of God,

we have an identity that *cannot* be threatened by circumstances.

Sorrow and loss and grief,

is *not* incompatible with Christian joy.

Don't let *any* well-meaning person tell you *otherwise*,
when you are grieving, in pain, or depressed.

Christian joy can co-exist with deep suffering.

Avoiding pain and suffering in order to "be happy"

is our *culture's* way of operating.

It's not the way of the Gospel.

Joy is *not* a personal state of mind.

Joy is a place.

Joy is having located our life in the life of God.

It is choosing to live in the kingdom God is establishing.

It is choosing to live in harmony with our Creator.

And since we were *created for* harmonious relationship with God,
there will *naturally* be a deeper sense of well-being
when our lives are aligned with that created purpose.

A life that is located in the life of God,

will share the same joy *God* has,

when shalom is restored.

And that is why the community of faith is so crucial.

When the Christian community gathers and worships
and works together,
we are constantly reminded of our real identity.

Our location in a joyful God is reinforced.

And the shallow nature of our *culture's* quest for happiness
is exposed for the cheap thrill it is.

This Advent, let's band together, and stage a rebellion
against the cultural assumptions that shape us,
that tell us joy is about maximizing my personal pleasure,
and protecting myself against every threat to my emotional high.

Instead, let's live as a joy-filled Christian community,
confident that our lives are located in the shalom life of God,
and invite the world *into* that life,
confidently proclaiming that joy to the world.

—*Phil Kniss, December 12, 2010*