

Shouts of Joy by Sharon Hammill
Read: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Psalm 126, John 1:6-8, 19-28

Did you ever know anyone who just exudes happiness and joy all the time? I have a dear friend of mine, Mark, that I worked with almost 20 years that is one of those people. He always had a great outlook on life, was nice to everyone he met. He was one of those people who constantly made you laugh with the stories he told. Our clients loved Mark and Mark loved our clients. He always had joy in his heart.

Having joy all the time? Do you do that? I know I don't. If something is going on with me, you can see it in my face. I may be sad, mad, worried, whatever the emotion, I show it on my face. I need to take a lesson from my friend Mark.

In our scripture lessons today refer to joy. We just lit the candle of joy in our advent wreath. Last Sunday, at the close of the Moravian Lovefeast, we sang "Joy To The World" as we lit candles and lifted them high. What a joyful sight! It's that time of year. Are you ready to shout for joy?

I know I preached from Isaiah a couple of weeks ago. The situation is the same. He is still dealing with the Hebrews in exile in Babylon. Cyrus of Persia has been sent to set them free and they can go back to Jerusalem. The message from Isaiah today is one of hope as he is trying to reassure them that it will be okay for them to leave.

Isaiah opening lines in today's passage may sound like something you may have heard in the gospels—Luke 4:18-19. Jesus is in Nazareth, in the synagogue, reading these words: "The Lord has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." (NIV) Jesus read this scripture and then proclaimed the scripture fulfilled.

There is joy in Isaiah's words. He goes on in verse 10 to say "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord. My whole being shall exult my God." Then he goes on to explain why. This text is one of salvation, one of hope for a people that have been lost. It is a shout of joy about a God who will save them.

The Psalm reading for today is also a song of joy for the restoration of Zion. The psalmist sings praises for being able to leave, however, they know restoration will not be easy. In our Adult Bible Study two weeks ago, we talked about the uneasiness of the Israelites leaving the comforts and the homes they established. This lament also points to this same concern. We are happy to leave, but restoration is not easy. However, this song of joy says that "Those who sow in tears, will reap songs of joy!"

How do we find joy in difficult times? Is this the message we get from our Old Testament readings today? Are we like those who tend to see the bright side of every situation and always seem joyful? Is that what the scriptures are asking us to do?

Let's struggle a minute with the first question I posed. How do we find joy in difficult times? Think about the death of a loved one. That is a difficult time however, we sit around and we tell stories or events that happened in our encounters with that person that bring a smile to our face or makes us laugh.

How do we find joy in difficult times? In a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina, church communities work together on mission trips in help of the restoration efforts. I recall reading that the Western Association of our conference who has suffered conflict over the past few years gathered a group together, some on both sides of the fence, and went to New Orleans as team in order to help someone in restoring their home. Through this experience they together were able to bring about some reconciliation and I am sure joy in the work that they had accomplished there. I am sure there was also joy they provided for the person whose home they were working on also.

Issues often divide churches—most of the issues have to deal with the physical plant, it may be in remodeling, in adding a new building, or simply picking out a color of new carpet, these issues often take the joy out of church. It makes church life difficult sometimes. But then you have to ask yourself, is the church simply the physical structure? No, the church is the people. While it is important that we have facilities to maintain the programs of the church, the church is not simply the building. The joy comes through these difficult discussions when we think about the wonderful bell choirs we have that performed last Sunday or the talented student vocalists who come and share their talents each Sunday, or the way the church comes together to ready a home for a refugee family that is moving here from Burma. Those are joyful moments for a congregation. The church is the people and their mission is to help those in the community and the world...That is joy in a difficult time.

Are we like those who always see the bright side of everything, always show that “joy” in them? In 1Thessalonians 5:16 it says: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” That is a tough order. Paul is asking that we rejoice always...now he was speaking to a group who was being persecuted. When we feel persecuted, beat up, beat down, do we feel like rejoicing?

Times are tough and we do have a tough time rejoicing. We like to play the “pity party.” Where’s the joy? We don’t have all we want or think we need and we have a tough time rejoicing. Our scripture lesson gives us that tough directive. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”

Maybe we need a new attitude. Maybe we need to be like my friend who seems to be happy all the time. My mother used to tell me when I am feeling down, that I just need to remember that there are those who are much worse off than I am. But in our consumer society, joy and happiness are often linked to material wealth. That gets us down.

Unemployment is at an all time high. I heard that in the U.S. in November, 500,000 people had been laid off from their jobs. In my own family, there has been a struggle with unemployment and it is difficult. It’s tough to shout for joy when you don’t know where your next meal is coming from or whether you will be able to keep your house or your car. But there are those, even faced with those circumstances, who keep their heads up, keep their faith in God, keep their faith that God will provide. They know what it is like to “Rejoice always and to give God thanks in all circumstances.”

So are you feeling joyful today? Are you ready to shout for joy? Are you ready to go from this place a person who knows that God is a God of faith, a God of hope, and God of love? That God living in us and through us provides that joy that we need each day of our life.

In closing, when I started this sermon journey this week, I thought of a song from my childhood, that I taught to the kindergarten children in my home, church and a song that some of you may know. If you do sing along:

I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart (where?)
Down in my heart (where?)
Down in my heart
I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart.
Down in my heart to stay.

Go from this place with the joy of God in your heart. Amen.