

## *Shifting Expectations*

*Isaiah 12: 2-6; Philippians 4: 4-7*

The third Sunday of Advent is referred to as Joy Sunday. It is a Sunday where we express our Joy as we prepare for Christmas and many of us have come to believe we will be happy because Christmas is almost here. Joy has somehow become associated with happiness. We have convinced ourselves that if we do all the right things, if we engage all the right rituals, the traditions of Christmas that are expected of us then we will be filled with joy. We will have that perfect Hallmark moment. How many people have thought to themselves, when everyone comes to our house, or comes home, I want them to have the perfect Christmas? How many of you have thought, if I find the perfect gift then everything will go back to normal? Many of us believe that the perfect gift or the perfect dinner or the perfect tree can heal all wounds, can reconcile all conflicts and will therefore make everyone happy.

The fact of the matter is that we can not schedule happiness, we can not schedule joy, though we still try to on the third Sunday in Advent. Joy and happiness are not the same thing. Our culture has us believing that we can achieve happiness if we just pursue it. This is one of the differences between joy and happiness. Happiness is something that is pursued. We have all heard about the pursuit of happiness. Joy is something that is experienced.<sup>1</sup> The most joyful moments that I have experienced come when I least expect them. Some of you know that I was in Disneyland this past week and I do expect to find happiness in the happiest place on earth and I experienced joy; but, not in the places you would expect. It was on the crazy roller coasters when I started to laugh hysterically and had the entire train turn around to see who was laughing. Those were the moments when my friends and family were crying because I was laughing so hard; pure joy in that moment. Or the moments when I have arrived at the church on Christmas Eve to a freshly fallen snow and the sound that comes with that which is so silent and peaceful. I have experienced joy when I am greeted by a fluffy dog who kisses me mercilessly while wagging there tail uncontrollably. I have experienced joy in a look from a friend that I haven't seen for a long time from across the room and when they realize that I am there to see them, you know that they are filled with joy, as am I.

Philip Campbell reminds us that “the experience of joyful peace is not always easily found amidst the great anxieties and expectations that this season can engender...in fact, for some,

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Evans Jr., *Feasting on the Word Year C*, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 62.

there is more anxious time in this moment than all the year. Some parishioners will labour under mounting pressure to have everything just right.”<sup>2</sup> Nothing crooked, all lights working, candles perfectly set and lit. It is very important. So, what would happen if we shifted our expectations. What would happen if we let go of our need for everything over Christmas time to be perfect? What would happen if we let go of our need to create that perfect moment? What would happen if we stopped focussing inwardly and instead turned our focus to prayer and to the coming of Jesus; to the moment when we connect with God?

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed today, “Surely God is my salvation, I will trust, and I will not be afraid for the lord God is my strength and my might. God has become my salvation.” Would we experience joy if we simply trust in God? Paul reminds us in his letter to the Philippians that we are not to worry about anything. How many of you have succeeded so far? As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, we should be taking time to be thankful, to pray and to simply share what we have from everything that goes wrong to all the things that go right. Or focussing or stopping to focus on all the negative comments of people around us that they are making; maybe we need to shift our focus from other expectations of us and instead turn our focus to God. What do we expect God will do at Christmas time? What are our expectations of our faith and of God? How will the birth of a child shift our perspective on what is most important? Will the birth of a child, naked and alone in a manger, teach us about the importance of forgiveness and grace?

Christmas for me is about the simple joy of being with people we love. It is the joy of being with people who accept us for who we are, right now, regardless of our flaws. Paul’s request that we “let our gentleness be known to everyone” is a reminder that we need to open ourselves up to each other; to show our soft underbelly. Even the grumpiest of people, have a gentleness to them, it they only let it out. If we follow Paul’s instructions and take our anxieties and our worries and share them with God in prayer, we will find that our hearts will swell, our spirits will lift. We need to rejoice in the story of Jesus as children do, with their whole hearts, when something magical and mysterious comes to life. We need to trust in the spirit of God’s grace and unconditional love, that we are enough and that all that is expected of us is to be present to one another, to be open to God’s spirit working in us; to love one another as we would be loved.

So, today I invite you to make space. Do this by shifting your expectations. I invite you to spend this week focussing on gentleness; gentleness with yourselves and with others. I invite you to let go of all that is causing you anxiety. If the pie doesn’t work it’s not a big deal, if the Christmas tree falls over, so be it. Let your worries go give them to God and simply bask in the joy of what today is; a celebration of time given by volunteers, a celebration of gifts that will help others who are in need, a celebration of the new life that is about to come. Being present at the birth of a child is truly a joyful experience. It’s a celebration, when all of us give of ourselves, to each other and to the community in which we live. Let us remember that every moment of joy is a Christmas gift. Philip Campbell concluded his discourse on Paul’s letter with this:

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Campbell, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 64.

“By offering who we are and what we have we can practice consideration for others and rejoice in the Lord always. God wants us to be happy, but happiness is not the purpose of life. Doing God’s will is. Gospel joy is always shared joy.”<sup>3</sup>

So, take time this week to pray. Receive the strength that God gives and do not worry about anything. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds as we prepare for the birth of Jesus. Be at peace friends and experience the joy that is awaiting. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Campbell, *Feasting on the Word*, p. 66.