

What keeps us from going home?

Zephaniah 31:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

Well, is it any wonder that I might be a little confused about what joy is when the scriptures for this Sunday that start off with, “You brood of vipers!” inspires joy in me.

Scriptures do have a way of letting us know, however, where we might have actually missed that which is appropriate in order to bring out in us that deep sense of joy. I’ve known it a few times, I know that: the day I was ordained; the day I first held my grandson in my arms; the day I got married in a church by a minister (that was in this century, by the way. ‘Cause in the last century, it wasn’t allowed). Moments of deep, abiding joy, while they may be few and far between are indeed to be treasured. And they will be treasured for a lifetime, because they are the ones that stay with us in our memories, in our souls, in the very deep part of our being.

Well, I turned things on its heel a little bit this week and I’ve saved storytime for now because this season is about story. It’s all about story. It’s all about wonderful, wise stories that lead, like music in my mind, to a place that we don’t necessarily always think to go. And especially if we happen to be a bunch of intellectuals. If we like to spend a lot of time in our head, story has a tendency to take us elsewhere. And I’m always impressed with how that will happen for me. And so this one is entitled, *Light of Christmas*, and it’s by Richard Paul Evans. Some of you may know his writings. Some of you may not. I’m not going to read it so much as tell it and show you the illustrations because, frankly, it’s the illustrations that are amazing:

High in the mountains, there was a town which had the name Nöel. Christmastown. You might go high into Jasper by that illustration. It was a town that was surrounded by tall white city walls, and the city gates were made of pure silver and it sounds like it was an amazing place. And in the town square, there was a big Christmas tree because after all, the town’s name was Nöel. What else you gonna have? But the Christmas tree was not the most important thing about Christmas.

The Christmas tree took second place to the great grass Christmas torch which stood next to it. And on Christmas Eve, the Keeper of the Flame came every year to light the torch to spread the light throughout the world.

Well, out around the hills surrounding Nöel, there was a little boy whose name was Alexander. He lived out there with his mom. They were alone. And Alexander heard that the Keeper of the Flame was going to choose someone new to light the torch on this particular year. And the person chosen

would be the one who gave the truest Christmas gift. And so Alexander chose to make his way into the village to see if he might become the one to light the Christmas torch.

And so, early on the morning of Christmas Eve, he set off on his way toward the village. His mom had packed a lunch, and he was walking to the town square. His lunch was kind of like our Fellowship time: there was some bread and a chunk of cheese, and a jar of hot cider. He was off. With a warning that once the flame was lit, it would be late and he was to stay in town at the church until the morning before he came home. And so he kissed his mother goodbye and he left.

Well, after walking most of the day, he was almost to the city and he noticed a small bundle of cloth in the snow and he stopped to see what might be wrapped in the cloth. Sorry choir! Okay, good. He thought somebody dropped their cloak. And then he noticed that it was not just a cloak but an old man. Well, Alexander took the time to take off his gloves to warm the man's face between his hands to finally bring him around, then offer him warm cider to drink. And the man asked if he was an angel, and Alexander said, "No, I'm Alexander." And the man smiled and said, "Thank you, Alexander." And Alexander said, "I'm too small to lift you, but I'm going into town. When I get there, I will bring someone back to help you." And he left the man with a cloak – his own cloak, so that as Alexander proceeded into the town, he was cold.

He ran through the town, trying to find somebody to help him, but it was almost time for the gates to close. And once the gates closed, you weren't getting back in. And if you didn't get back in, you had no hope of being the one who would light the flame. And so, guess what? He was on his own. Now the phrase you brood of vipers starts to make sense, doesn't it? Of all the people gathered in the village, no one was going to leave to help that old man because they wanted to light the flame. In order to do what? Bring joy. Hmm...

Well, the gates did begin to close and Alexander saw that tree, he saw the torch, he looked at the gate. He was torn between the two. But it was clear he was not leaving that old man up there in the snow for the night. And so he got out just in time. And when he got back, he found that there was just a cloak and the old man was gone. So he picked up his cape and he ran back toward the town and he got there to find that they were locked and that they wouldn't be opened again until the lighting was done. It was getting dark; it was too late to go home, and so he sat down outside the gate, wiping away his tears.

And then he heard a creak of a rusty hinge, and the gate opened a crack. It wasn't much – probably wasn't big enough for somebody my size. But for a little boy, he scooted through that crack. And he ran through the town square that was filled with excited people, and he climbed up on a window ledge to see. And suddenly the front door opened from a building across from the town square, and a man dressed in a golden robe came out. He was carrying a beautiful wreath. Everybody fell silent because the Keeper of the Flame had arrived. The Keeper said, "Let the offerings begin", and everybody came forward with all of their goodies. They had come prepared to give gifts, great

gifts, expensive gifts, wonderful gifts, because only the one giving the best gift would get to be the Keeper and light the flame.

Well, all of those people came forward. The minstrel sang a song; the writer offered a Christmas story; the wealthiest one in the city made a golden ornament for the tree. And the crowd clapped, cheered with every one, and after everybody had laid down their gifts, the Keeper looked out and asked if there were anymore offerings, but no one spoke. And then the Keeper said, "Well, then I will have to choose the greatest gift, truest gift, the most marvelous gift. You have given much," he said. "But only one of you has given well."

And the Keeper, of course, called up Alexander. Alexander, who had stopped. Alexander, who had given of himself to those, well at least one, who was lying frozen in the snow. And the Keeper said, "You all passed by me tonight lying in the snow outside the city gate." We walked past God how many times in our lives? I have no idea. I probably do it everyday. Oh, I do, because I walk by another human being every single day. "Only this boy stopped to help me," the Keeper said. "But in your hurry to keep Christmas, you forgot Christmas. The truest gift of Christmas is the gift of self. The flame of Christmas must burn within you if it is indeed to light the world."

Deep, abiding, fulfilling joy. We found in the truest gift, which is the one we give of our own soul, directly to the soul of another. Without comment, without question. No strings attached. Thanks be to God.