

“Worth the Wait: Joy”

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:39-56

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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I anticipated this: Somehow “hope”, “peace”, and “love” are easier for me to deal with than “joy”. The other three concepts seem more obvious elements in the landscape of life: “There...there is hope...There is peace...I know it when I see it...There...that is love...unmistakably...that is love!”

“Joy”, it seems to me, is less discernible, less distinct. Perhaps this is because it is too nearly related to “happiness”. The dictionary offers each one among the definitions of the other. To be “joyful” is to be “happy”; to be “happy” is to be “joyful”. But I think people would be more apt to describe me as “happy”, if asked, than “joyful”. And I own that.

I do recall “joyful” moments in my life: Completing 184 miles by bike along the C & O canal; summiting a 14,000 foot peak in Colorado; the birth of a daughter or son; the graduation of a daughter or son. And those moments were all worth waiting for.

But I admit it: I am too focused, on a daily basis, on responsibilities, and projects, and agendas, and lists, and commitments, and what still needs to get done, and mistakes, and regrets, and what others think of me... to exude much real joy about life...about the gift of life...about God in my life.

I admit it! How about you?

So to the point: What is there to be joyful about? What might unleash joy in life?

Listen, if you would, to excerpts of the testimony of Carolyn, from an essay printed in the December 11 issue of USA TODAY:

“In October of 2015 the man who had been my husband for fifty-six years died. December found me still numb with grief. As my children and I struggled to navigate the season without a compass, we were feeling a lot of things. Joy wasn’t one of them. If it was there, it was buried under a thick layer of pain.

“It was time to write the annual holiday letter Jerry and I had always written together, but I felt lost....Then I reflected on what had followed Jerry’s death. I realized that this was a season when grief, like the Wise Men, came bearing gifts. I rarely weep, but tears were a gift that relieved my anguish. Old photo albums revived happy memories. I was comforted by the simple presence of my family and others who loved me. My church community took over planning the funeral. Neighbors brought food and chipped in with practical help. Loving messages poured in through letters, cards, and phone calls. Friends picked up relatives at the airport. Jerry’s former colleagues offered help.

“And so I wrote my holiday letter mindful of the gifts I was receiving, gifts wrapped in love. The grief didn’t leave, but my dominant emotion became gratitude. I decided to write as honestly as I could. The pain was there and I acknowledged it. I realized I was not alone, that many of my friends were suffering too. A few of them had also lost a loved one. Others might be facing a frightening medical diagnosis, or the end of a marriage, or a child mired in addiction. Or they were haunted by the gnawing fears of aging or loneliness.

“My own grief had sensitized me to notice the losses confronting others....Keeping pain locked in a closet carries an emotional, spiritual, and sometimes physical cost. I wanted to be real, hoping this would give others permission to do the same...

“On a positive note, remember you’re still alive...Ending your letter on a positive note will bring hope to the recipients. Your honesty will inspire courage. Your letter may be the best gift a grieving friend receives...And having given it will bring you something that feels like joy.”

Carolyn Parr and her husband Jerry were, some years ago, active members of Heritage Christian Church of Silver Spring. Carolyn Parr is in private business, advising families how to talk honestly and openly about end-of-life issues. Jerry Parr was a career Secret Service agent, and the member of Ronald Reagan's protection team who pushed the President into the car when a shot rang out in the driveway of the Hilton Hotel, covering the President with his own body, saving the President's life.

The truth is that circumstances that are capable of causing great pain, are coincidentally capable of inspiring great joy: Fans of a long-suffering losing team are overjoyed with an unfamiliar championship, while fans of a favored team are devastated with defeat. Families of soccer players who survived a plane crash are enormously joyful, while families of players who died experience enormous pain. One family is inexplicably saved by an immigration policy, while neighbors are divided by an immigration policy. In the hospital lobby, a doctor informs a mother and father that their child survived emergency surgery, while across the room a doctor informs a mother and father that their child could not be saved.

So what is there to be joyful about, in a world where pain is nearby?

Only and always about the gift of life! Only and always about God in our lives! Only and always about God-with-us! Only and always about Emmanuel! The Isaiah Chapter 35 kind of Joy. Joy such that even the creation itself breaks into praise: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad...the desert shall rejoice and blossom...the ransomed of the Lord shall return...they shall obtain joy and gladness...and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

That joy is worth waiting for!

So what is there to be joyful about, in a world where pain is close to the surface?

Only and always about the gift of life! Only and always about God in our lives! Only and always about God-with-us! Only and always about Emmanuel! The Luke Chapter One kind of Joy. The joy such that the testimony of Mary with her friend Elizabeth will foretell how the power of the Holy Spirit vested in her will answer each and every one of the world's ills: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior...His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation...he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts...he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly...My soul magnifies the Lord..."

That joy is worth waiting for!

William Sloane Coffin, Chaplain of Yale University in the 1960's and 70's, was one of the noblest moralists of the Twentieth Century, perhaps in all of American history. I knew him later as a friend and colleague, while he occupied the pulpit at famous Riverside Church in New York City. Two days before Christmas in 1984, Bill preached profoundly, as he always did, on the simple title "Joy". In the sermon, he told of great pain, and great joy:

"Two years ago in the early morning hours when I received word that my son had been killed, friends came to my apartment...I'll never forget the arms around me...And that is exactly the way it is with Emmanuel, 'God with us'...This child whose birth we celebrate is not a memory but a presence, a constant caring presence of unbelievable sensitivity. Only of Jesus can you say 'He knows exactly what I am going through...Christ is always with you...not easing the pain so much as improving the quality of the suffering. Christ, by his constant, caring presence brings a touch of heavenly joy to every earthly sorrow."

That joy is worth waiting for...especially when pain is nearby, when pain is close to the surface!

What is there to be joyful about?

Don't ever forget the Arms around you!: Not so much easing the pain as improving the quality of suffering.

What is there to be joyful about?

The caring presence of Christ, bringing a touch of heavenly joy to every earthly sorrow.

That joy is worth waiting for!