

Advent and Giving Way to Joy

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Joy, it is said, is one of the attributes of God, an attribute we could have witnessed at the dawn of creation when a happy God looked over His handiwork and saw that it was Good; an attribute seen by others at the birth of Jesus when God sent forth singing angels bathed in heavenly light to waken the world to His own huge celebration; and an attribute seen at Christ's baptism when God proclaimed, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." One hymnist calls God "the well-spring of the joy of living." Another calls the Holy Spirit "the joy divine." Advent, which begins in a couple of weeks, is the season of both our own joy and of the joy of God Himself.

Sometimes, it's true, we do sing of "joy disclosed in sorrow," joy as the great comforter, joy as the easer of pain. But there is a time for joy to be simply joy. It's a time for joy to carry no burden. It's a time when a little tiny bird can let go with a song far bigger than itself.

This joy is undisciplined, revealing itself in the widening of eyes, the gentle smile or silly grin spreading across the face, maybe in that little bouncing and trembling that accompany delight. Sometimes, perhaps, joy is the surprise of wondrous and unexpected achievement: the young baseball player's first real slide into second base, the sudden surfacing of a good way to solve a math problem. In such joy, there's a letting go reminiscent of a youngster releasing the rope tied to a branch high above and falling gleefully into October's pile of leaves.

Some members of this congregation, like me, have harbored resentment toward other houses of worship. Some have been severely wounded by the churches of their childhood and are angry with leaders who can expel a church from their convention for welcoming people like themselves. Members of this particular church say theirs is a thinking faith. To the degree that those feelings and that claim are justified, they all make letting go, giving way to joy if only for a while, particularly hard for this congregation.

The tendency of most of us is to retreat into our thoughts and hold on to our anger even if it means leaving the victory and the joy that is rightfully ours to others.

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” So saith the Teacher. About twelve per cent of our hymns mention joy. Only about 3% are really about joy. So much for counting. There is a time for counting and weighing and a time to let go of our instruments of measurement, a time for studying the mechanics of walking and a time for enjoying a baby’s first steps, a time for critically sifting through the theology of our hymns and the translations of our scriptures and a time for singing the hymns before us just as they are without one plea. There is a time for questioning a virgin birth and a time for simply enjoying the promise of a birth whose story has been preserved for 2000 years as a part of the faith of our fathers.

For joy there is a season, a season that is quickly approaching. Advent — the four Sundays in December— is a time for us to let go, to let go of our religious struggles, our doubts, our resentments of the mistakes and cruelties of the houses of worship of our youth, our suspicions, our fears of making philosophical fools of ourselves—it’s the time for letting go just as the youngster lets go of the rope and falls gleefully into the leaves below or the young ball player slides bravely into second base. It’s time to let go. It’s the time to experience our religion’s greatest gift to us: pure, unadulterated joy.

Joy is pure – It is the clear, silvery sheen on a shimmering soap bubble, the sound of a finger rubbing the rim of a piece of fine crystal, the glitter of clear water passing over stones in a mountain brook. Joy is as pure as the pale delicacy of a lily of the valley; it’s as pure as the declarative whiteness of a magnolia blossom.

Sometimes someone special gives joy to us. A thirteen-year-old little girl was sent to live with her aunt and step-uncle. She was sent by her father, a single parent who very much wanted to be a warm, loving father but who simply was not. The little girl already knew she loved her aunt and uncle and from the airplane above her heart “leapt up when she beheld” the blue-green hills of western Carolina. But then as the plane was about to land

in Asheville, for the very first time, it occurred to her that perhaps her aunt and uncle might not be so happy to see her as she thought she would be to see them. As the plane taxied to a stop, she didn't spot anyone there to meet her and her anxiety mounted. But before she got across the tarmac and into the lobby, a tall, sandy-haired, gruff-voiced man was engulfing her in a wonderful, warm, welcoming bear hug. Her Uncle Jack had just given the little girl absolute joy and created for her the image of joy that she carried with her for the entire rest of her life.

Sometimes joy takes us by surprise – it can be the delight that hits you when you see a deer emerge from the urban woods near your church as I did a couple of weeks ago, the feeling you get when you first notice the explosion of autumn's vibrant reds and golds on your Charlotte street. It's the feeling I got when I watched a silent Kodak home movie from the 1940s that I found in the attic and suddenly came face to face with my dignified old grandfather laughing uproariously and contagiously from across the years – at what I had no idea.

Joy can also be serene, coming to us when we stand arms elbow deep in hot, sudsy water at the kitchen sink or coming to us perhaps in the fat raindrops plopping on the newspaper that we're snoozing under on a summer day.

Sometimes we grab joy for ourselves. A brash young man had two very good friends, two men as different as two men could possibly be, one, a great writer and literary critic, creator of the first real dictionary of the English language, a moralist of the first order, and the other, sort of the Larry Flynt or Howard Stern of his day, a writer of blasphemous and pornographic poetry, an ultra liberal, the kind that gives liberals a bad name, the man, by the way, for whom Wilkesboro and Wilkes County are named. These two men, the great moralist and the great pornographer– hated each other's politics and detested one another's public personas, so, of course, the brash young man thought it would be fascinating to bring them together by surprise at a social event just to see what would happen. His machinations to arrange this meeting kept going awry, but finally after much wire pulling and negotiating the young man had his trap set. Then, in his excited

anticipation on the carriage ride to the big dinner party, he sat there and hugged himself for pure joy. Yes, even mischievous joy can be pure.

Sometimes we ourselves give joy. A teenager used to do the holiday gift baking in her family. Among the packages of cookies she mailed out each year there was always a box for an elderly bachelor uncle in memory of times years earlier when the two of them would walk each day to the bakery many blocks away to buy two cookies for nine cents. The bachelor uncle never acknowledged the holiday packages, but the teenager wasn't surprised; he was wonderfully eccentric. The teenager went off to college and one year decided to visit friends in Florida. On the way back to campus, she decided to go farther out of her way than made sense just to visit her eccentric, old uncle for a few minutes. When she got there, the house was run down, and her uncle was disheveled, but he was obviously thrilled to see her. When it was time for her to go back to the bus station, he suggested that she walk rather than call a cab and even said he'd walk with her. As he ran a comb through his hair, she saw taped to the mirror above his dresser all five of the little gift cards she'd enclosed with those Christmas cookies. She knew then that when she sent her uncle cookies, what she was sending him was joy.

“For everything there is a season.”

On the four Sundays of December we'll relive and share the joyful anticipation of Jesus' birth first experienced by Mary, Joseph, and God Himself. By the final Sunday before Christmas, we'll relive also the joyful anticipation of others, foreigners, the Three Wise Men who long knew what was about to happen and who appeared before the holy family to await the big event and share with them its divine joy.

Let us . . . let go. Let us in this church have our victory and the divine joy that is rightfully ours. In December's crisp nights of the early winter season as we hear freezing, dew-laden blades of grass crunch beneath our feet, may our thoughts turn to one midnight clear in Bethlehem, and may we simply give ourselves to the pure joy of this season and that night. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”