

"UNCONTAINABLE JOY"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
December 11, 1983
Isaiah 35:1-10

In a barber shop a junior high teacher was describing the excitement at school when classes were dismissed for Christmas vacation. He said, "Oh, there was foot-stomping, wall-pounding and all sorts of rejoicing." "Real wild, eh?" asked the barber. "Yes," replied the teacher, "And that was only in the teachers' lounge."

Joy is a fitting response to Christmas. Joy is a fitting response to the coming of Christ to this world, the birth of the baby, the gift of God to the world. In fact, joy itself is a gift from God. C.S. Lewis wrote, "The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world; but joy, pleasure, and merriment, God has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy." We are not immune from trouble, sickness, insecurity, setbacks, but, in the midst of turmoil, there is joy, a gift, a Christmas gift from God.

Sometimes we get mixed up and feel guilty when we are happy. The world is in misery, we feel; is it right for me to feel joy? Shouldn't I share in the world's suffering? Yes, but in the sharing of suffering, God gives joy in order to sustain, encourage, and make the sharing not only bearable, but productive. G.K. Chesterton at the close of his classic, Orthodoxy, wrote, (remember, he wrote before inclusive language), "The mass of men have been forced to be happy about the little things, but sad about the big ones. Nevertheless it is not native to man to do so. Man is more himself, man is more human, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labor by which all things live." We live by uproarious joy, uncontainable joy. That is the promise of Christmas.

Our Old Testament lesson described an experience of the Jews in uncontainable joy, Isaiah 35:1-10. There was "gladness, singing, shouting for joy." They saw the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God, God's splendor, greatness and power.

The joy was so uncontainable, it burst the bonds in praise. The joy and presence of the Lord were so powerful, it was as if the desert was reclaimed and rejuvenated. I understand from those who have toured that part of the world that much of it is barren wasteland, except where the modern Jews have made the desert come alive. In this passage, the desert rejoices because of the power of joy. The flowers bloom in wastelands, and the desert becomes as beautiful as the Lebanon mountains and as fertile as the fields of Carmel and Sharon. Streams of water gush forth from the burning sand and lakes are formed. Springs of water remodel the dry land. The pesky jackals are replaced by grass and reeds where more productive animals may graze. The joy is so great, nature is changed.

The joy is so powerful, bodily changes are seen in people. We call them healing miracles. Certainly we have discovered in our day the important relationship of a positive, happy, joyful outlook of a person to their body. The joy of the Jews in this passage was so great that the eyes of the blind were opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame began to dance, the dumb began to sing for joy. The weak, discouraged and tired found strength. The feeble knees became firm. And the promise was made: "Be strong, don't be afraid, fear not! For God is coming! God is coming and he will save you."

Joy is a gift from God, uncontainable joy, all around us, waiting to be experienced. Zorba the Greek found such joy, and found it in the basic, simple things of life, which we moderns so often take for granted. Nikos Kazantzakis' Zorba the Greek is probably the most exuberant figure to burst upon the literary scene. In trying to explain his zest for life, Zorba says, "My joys here are great, because they are very simple and spring from the everlasting elements: the pure air, the sun, the sea and the wheat on loaf."

Where do we find such joy? How can we experience such joy as normative in our lives, not occasional, but normative, and the grief and worrying experiences are then the occasional? How is such joy possible? Let's look closer at our Isaiah passage this morning. Why were the Jews so joyful? They were on a road, called the Road of Holiness or the Holy Way. They were on a journey, and they knew where they had been, and they knew where they were going.

First, they knew where they had been. They had been in exile. Their homeland of Judah had been conquered by the Babylonians. Their beloved temple had been destroyed. Most of the leaders had been carried into exile to serve the Babylonians. They knew what it was to lose everything they had. They knew what real insecurity was like: to lose home, family, loved ones, the temple, the focal point of their existence, their national identity. They had lost it all. They knew humiliation, devastation, and sorrow. Now, Babylonia had been conquered by Persia, and Cyrus, King of Persia, was allowing them to go home. They were joyful because they knew where they had been. They had looked death in the face.

Most alcoholics do not experience recovery until they look death in the face, see what is happening to them, realize what the future is bringing; and come to themselves, admit they are alcoholics, turn to God for help, and accept treatment. Dying churches are beyond help of recovery until they look death in the face, and make a drastic turn-around. The Bible calls this repentance, the turning from and the turning to God. An individual person will not experience salvation, or be born-again, until you look death in the face, see where your life is headed without Jesus Christ, and turn around, repent, take the other road back, and place your life in God's hands. Then, joy is experienced. The redeemed, the ransomed, the forgiven, the reconciled experience a joy that is uncontainable, for they know where they have been.

Secondly, the Jews experienced uncontainable joy such as described in our passage today, because they now knew where they were going. They were going home, home to Zion, home to Jerusalem. To go home was so wonderful, it was as if the desert had come alive with flowers, water, and grass. The lame danced, the blind saw, the deaf heard, the dumb sang. They were going home. No wonder there was gladness, singing, and shouting for joy.

Some of us have difficulty experiencing uncontainable joy because we don't know where we've been (we have not looked death in the face) and we don't know where we are going. Who was it who said that Columbus was a typical politician. Columbus didn't know where he was going; when he got there, he didn't know where he was; when he got home, he didn't know where he had been; and, he did it all on a government grant! That is true of many people. If you don't know where you are going, how do you know when you get there?

Years ago, a farmer was finishing his weekly Saturday shopping trip. As he was getting into his wagon, he had a nagging feeling he was forgetting something. He re-checked his list, then checked it again. No, he had been to every store, purchased every item. As he drove the horse and wagon home, he still had this feeling he had forgotten something, and it came to him as he drove into the yard, and the children hollered, "Where's Mama?" Some go through life with the nagging feeling they had forgotten something; something is missing; a vague, uncertain, apprehension.

Joy is experienced when you know where you have been and know where you are going; when your goals are clear and the destination clearly identified. Particularly joyful, in fact, the joy is uncontainable, when heaven is your home, the kingdom of God is your clear destination, and you are on the road pointed out to you, taught to you, and the toll even paid, by Jesus Christ.

It is in the coming of Christ that the wilderness blossoms. It is in Christ that the glory and splendor of God is experienced. It is in Christ that the blind see, lame dance, deaf hear, and dumb sing. It is in Christ that God has come to save us. To be in Christ, to have seen death in the face and know what it is like to live outside Jesus Christ and to have turned to him and committed your life to him, is to experience uncontainable joy. It is a journey of joy.

May this Christmas be an experience of joy to sustain you in your struggles, and in the sharing of suffering. May you capture a clear vision of Jesus Christ, commit yourself to his way, walk his road of holiness, and with gladness, sing and shout for joy.

"UNCONTAINABLE JOY"

ISAIAH 35:1-10

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER 11, 1983