

To Bring Joy

From the series: Waiting For Messiah To Come –

Text: Isaiah 65:18; Luke 2:10

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is appropriate that twice a year the sanctuary is resplendent in beauty and we take a moment to remember those we've loved and lost a while, and to honor others whom we would value and affirm. It is appropriate that we do it on the two high feast days of the Christian Church. We do it, obviously, on Easter, because we celebrate the Resurrection and our confident affirmation that this is not all there is, that there is something more, and that those we've loved and lost a while are home in Eternal Light. But, it's appropriate that we do it also on Christmas, the Festival of the Incarnation, for if Easter declares that there is something more, the Incarnation declares that what is now is really good. It is the story of God's identification with the world; it is God's affirmation of creation; it is God's affirmation of the body, of material, of this life, of the human drama being played out in time and space - this present life, this present moment.

Thus, the Christian faith makes two great affirmations. It says on Easter that this is not all there is, but there is something more; and it says on Christmas, what is now is very good. It is appropriate that we celebrate the Resurrection remembering those we've loved and lost, and that we celebrate Christmas as an affirmation of God with us, here and now. As we do that, we understand that this world is God's world and this life is a gift of God.

What I've been trying to say in this Advent season is that there are some things that cannot be put off. I want to be very clear about my affirmation of that which lies beyond, but this morning I want to say that we ought not to wait for Messiah to come for the gift of joy, for joy is for now; it is for this present experience. To enter deeply into the experience of joy is the invitation of God and is that which enriches and deepens this present human experience.

I've been suggesting during Advent that there is a tendency in the Christian Church to project into the future that which God intends for the here and now, that there has been a tendency in the Christian Church to miss this moment, throwing up our hands as though what is, is and cannot be altered and we simply endure this life, waiting for it to pass until we enter into that perfection, that

bliss, that perfect state of righteousness and peace. I believe that if we are waiting for Messiah to come to do justice or to make peace, or to live with joy, we are missing God's intention for this moment, for this world, for this life. And so, at the risk of being misunderstood, let me be clear again - what I say detracts not at all from our Christian affirmation that this life is not all that there is. But, let me suggest to you that the way to live life fully with joy is to live as though this is the only life and this is the only day we'll ever have. Joy is not for the future. Joy is for now.

I realize that to say that is simple enough, but I don't have some magic wand I can wave over you and send you on your way rejoicing. I also know that we're all programmed differently, our genetic makeup, the environment in which we've been raised - all of those things constitute the person that we are, and there are some of you that are sunny personalities. I can tell by looking at your face. And there are some of you that are grumps. I can tell that from your face, too. (No fair poking one another, now.) Well, it goes without saying that we do have a certain personality. And there are some of us that just live life in a happier mood than others.

But, I'm not talking about happiness. Happiness is a surface thing. Happiness is having your Christmas list all fulfilled on Christmas morning; happiness is having the Detroit Lions win their final game on Monday Night Football; happiness is having Wayne Fontes back for another season or whatever it may be. Happiness is up and down; there are moments when things go well and we're happy and then everything falls apart and we're sad. I'm not talking about happiness. I'm talking about joy, which is something deeper.

I'm talking about joy, which is a consistent perspective, a posture over against the whole of life and the whole of reality. I'm talking about a joy that sees through the surface, deep down in things, and has come to a kind of lightness of heart quite independent of the immediate circumstances of one's life. It is that posture of heart that keeps us steady, in sunshine and rain, in light and in darkness. Joy is a present possibility for those who get their thinking straight. And I do believe it is a matter of thinking correctly. We are shaped, finally, by our thinking and that's true of us as individuals, and it's true of us as a community of people.

The Christian faith, the Christian Church was born out of the womb of Judaism, and somehow or other, Jewish people with that rich Hebrew scripture tradition, have been able to enter, I believe, more wholesomely into the celebration of this life than is often the case with Christian people. I believe that, in the Christian Church we have tended to project into another world God's intention for this world, and we have failed to celebrate Creation as God's creation, and we have often failed to enter fully into this present life with zest because we have tended to see it under a cloud. Oftentimes the impression I get from Christian preaching that I hear on occasion, or the expressions of Christian piety, is that this life and this world are something to be gotten through and endured in order that we

might enter into that final blessed state beyond. That is a denigration of this human existence in time and space, and quite illegitimately so, for this life, this creation, this human existence, these days have been affirmed by the Eternal God Who called it into being and in the Incarnation fully identified with it. We did not bring along with us out of our Hebrew past that celebration of this world, this life, this day.

Now, it was not that the Hebrew Prophet did not know of the darkness and the pain of human existence. The 65th chapter of Isaiah indicates that the writer had experienced the darkness that is all too true. He says there's a day coming when they'll build houses and dwell in them, they'll plant gardens and eat the fruit thereof. No longer will they build houses and another dwell in them, or plant gardens and another eat. He says the day is coming when there will no infant die in infancy and everyone will live to a ripe old age. He's looking to those, to that future day when those things that are so painful in the present will be overcome.

There was a future orientation in these prophets, to be sure, but it was a future within this world, it was a future within history. It was not projected into another world; it was not something about heaven out there. It was about here and now, this world, and it would come, the prophet said, because God would send a shoot out of the stump of Jesse. This one would judge according to righteousness and truth. There would be that day when one would come and they would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and they would not learn war anymore. They would not hurt. There was a day, this prophet says, when they'll not hurt in all my holy mountain, when the lion and the lamb and the wolf, the whole of creation will live at peace. There will be Shalom. But, it was a this-worldly reality. So, they knew the darkness, but they knew something else, and this is where joy comes in. They knew that God was about something deep down in things. They knew that what was, the darkness they were experiencing, was not the intention of the Creator, because the intention of the Creator was for this life to be a sacrament, for this life to be a joy. God intended it as such, says the prophet. Listen to what he says:

I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people. I am about to create Jerusalem as the joy and its people as a delight.

And God caused the people, in turn, to rejoice. The creator says, according to the Hebrew prophet, "I delight in you. I delight in my people." Creation's end is delight.

I have a friend who threatens to write a theology book, "The Theology of Delight." He was a student of A. A. Van Ruler at Utrecht in The Netherlands. Van Ruler used to chide the Church for putting so much stress on salvation, redemption, sin, guilt and that stuff. He said that's almost an appendix to what God is about. God is about creation. God is about new creation; God is about this whole drama and the bringing to fullness the human experience before God's face. God says "I delight in my people. I create Jerusalem with joy, so rejoice, my people."

That was the vision that shaped the thinking of the Jewish people, to be able to celebrate this world rather than seeing this world as a vale of tears to be traversed, endured and delivered from in order that we might finally arrive home in heaven. No, that is to fail to live fully into the gift of now which is marked through the Incarnation with the presence of God, Immanuel, God with us, here and now.

So, I want to suggest this morning that if we wait for Messiah to come for joy, we will have sadly missed God's intention for our present, which is to revel in creation, to live fully, to actualize our potential, to live lovingly, embracing one another, to savor this world.

I was driving down Lakeshore in the middle of the week, and all the snow had just fallen freshly. It was cold and crisp and snowballs tufted the pine trees and laid the dunes with a coat of ermine. For a moment the sun broke through. It was a transforming magnificence, and I thought to myself, "Dear God, what a world! What a splendid garden in which to dwell. What a home in which to be at home and celebrate God, the Creator of it all, who would have the creature live with joy on tiptoe, celebrating this present gift."

I cannot speak of joy this morning without acknowledging that that joy must transcend the darkness. We've had too much death around here in this community of faith. I have buried too many recently whose lives were too brief. I know the agony; I cannot preach on joy this morning, having walked through the week that I have just walked through, without having to face up to the fact that there is a full complement of pain and sadness. But, again, if I cannot this morning speak of joy now, then our gospel is hollow. Then we're just kidding ourselves; then it is true what we need is a rescue operation to release us from this present wicked world. Ah, but the Church has majored in bad news, casting aspersions on Creation and this present existence. Joy is something that sees down more deeply and is able, even in the present circumstance, to say neither sword, nor hunger, nor famine, nor peril - none of these things will separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus, who is Emmanuel, who is God with us here and now in this present moment. There is nothing in life or death or principality or power, or things in the heights or the depths or anything in all of creation that shall ever separate us from that God who at Christmas has come to identify with us, and who, through the Easter miracle, promises that this is not all there is. But, if we could only live as if this were the only day we had, if we could only live as if this were the only life we had, the only world we had, the only possibility we had - if we could so live so fully, then we could throw ourselves with abandon into today - then, whatever else there is, is pure bonus. But already, this is pure gift, and so not when Messiah comes, but today.

You see, today is the only day you'll ever have. If the gift of tomorrow comes, it will be today. So, if there are words of love to speak, speak them today. If there are those to embrace, embrace them today. If there are dreams brewing in your

heart, make work of them today. God delights in you and God calls you to delight in this present moment, in this present world, for it is a God-drenched world and it is made for your joy. So, enjoy and the rest will take care of itself.