

“What did you go out to see?”
A Sermon for United Christian Church
Lincolntonville, Maine
Sunday, December 11, 2016
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Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10 & Matthew 11:2-11

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.
Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 35:1-10

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Matthew 11:1-11

Will you pray with me. God of all hope, lasting peace and unqualified joy, surprise us again with who you are. Help us to find you in the darkest of times. Help us to recognize you in the least of us. Guide us into joy by simply knowing you are with us, no matter what. Amen

Well, "joy" IS our theme for today! We lit a pink candle along with the purple ones of the first two Sundays of Advent for hope and peace a little while ago. The pink candle

symbolizes light and joy in the midst of darkness and waiting for whatever will come in the days ahead.

In the Christian calendar, what we're waiting for is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, which we have come to recognize on December 25th each year. But as the events of the past few years have unfolded, I would guess most, if not all people in our country, are now waiting for something else – for what the news will bring in the new year, for what new alliances and animosities will spring up, for what new cyberspace surprises and challenges will face our country, for what worldwide collaborations will be created while hatreds and prejudices seem to lead to more war and terrorism in too many places.

How are we to let go of all of that *difficult* waiting.... to become vessels still able to hold drops of joy, buds of new life and flowers of goodness in full bloom and loveliness?

As is so often the case, when challenging times come, I am drawn to the words of Frederick Buechner for comfort and solace. Here's what he wrote about "joy" in his amazing little book entitled *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC*: "Joy – In the Gospel of John, Jesus sums up pretty much everything by saying, 'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.' (Jn 15:11) [Buechner reflects, Jesus is purported to have said these words] at the supper that he knew was the last one he'd have a mouth to eat. *Happiness* turns up more or less where you'd expect it to – a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. *Joy*, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it."¹

Joy comes to me when I witness Doug helping one or two of the children light the altar candles at the beginning of our Sunday service and then helping them to extinguish them at the end of our Sunday service. It brings me joy to see the smiles on your faces and occasionally the tears in your eyes when this is happening. It brings me joy to witness the fellowship and participation in our church's activities that all of you demonstrate. I'm here to tell you neither of those happen so often in some churches! Not all Christians display their love for one another in the ways you all do. Your commitment to "be the church" is a joy for me that I never expected.

In the midst of all the difficult and dangerous challenges facing us in our country, finding happiness and joy wherever we can is a priceless, precious and indispensable search. Happiness is an *expected* state of mind. Joy is the greatest *unpredictable* delight of the heart.

Even knowing his life was about to end, Jesus offered joy to those who would find in him the goodness of life, the relief of healing relationship, the love of God. In our passage from Matthew today, Jesus asked the crowds around him the same question three times about who they believed John the Baptist to be. "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." (Matt 11:7-9)

What do WE go out to see every day? What do you think of the instant you wake up each morning? Here's what I'm trying hard NOT to think about when I wake up each morning, "Oh Lord, what awful news am I going to read today on my little 'smart' phone?" I have to confess this is tough for me. I so like to think of myself as a "half full" kind of person, as I believe I've confessed to you before, seeing joyful things all around me, but that's been difficult in this past year or so. So, I don't know about you, but I need to hear about joy today in the midst of so much that doesn't seem joyful at all.

¹Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC*, revised and expanded, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1973, 1993, p. 57-58.

Even the prophet Isaiah, who had to proclaim difficult and sad truths to his people centuries before Jesus was born, was able to say, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing." (Is 35:1)

Even the apostle Paul, writing from prison, after Jesus' death, to a people in Philippi suffering conditions of great danger, could say, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:4-7)

Isaiah, Jesus and Paul -- These pillars of our sacred family of long ago could shout for joy and affirm it in the midst of the greatest trials and tribulations. Can we?

Can we shed tears of sadness and loss and smile through them?

Can we mourn for those who have lost their lives to violence and the effects of prejudice and hatred, AND work joyfully toward the day when guns are drawn down and violence is made unacceptable as entertainment, and as a way to settle disputes?

Can we stand up for cooperation and stand down for bullying in all its forms as an abomination to a modern 21st century world?

Can we hold one another up in our sadness, and stand up for a new era of peaceful coexistence, for a changed national mindset where more dollars are spent on the care and feeding and well being of our children and upset young adults and ailing older adults than on the production of more weapons to be used for supposed sport and entertainment as well as war?

My friends, I'm trying hard to be joyful in these challenging times, but it's very hard some days. And then.... this week, I was reminded of a true story I read some years ago. Jim Wallis, an evangelical preacher, speaker and prolific writer about justice matters, tells the story in his book *The Soul of Politics*. He writes, "A good friend left for El Salvador to work with refugees. During her first week there, Yvonne Dilling found herself helping people cross the Lempe River into Honduras to escape the Salvadoran military. The scene was as dramatic as it was dangerous, for U.S.-made helicopter gunships swooped down from overhead, strafing the river to prevent the campesinos from fleeing. Yvonne, who had been a swimmer in college, carried children on her back, swimming them across the river to safety. It was quite an introduction to her new work.

Her mission continued with great intensity, and it seemed that there was no end to it. She worked day and night. One day an old refugee woman asked Yvonne why she worked all the time. 'You never stop. You don't join with us for our fiestas and celebrations. Why don't you ever take time to sit down with us and watch our children laugh or just look up at the stars at night? Why is it that you never have time to play or to pray?'

A bit startled, Yvonne responded by saying that the work she was doing was a matter of life and death. The suffering was so great, there was no time to rest. It was a noble version of the popular slogan, 'It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it.'

The wise old woman just shook her head. 'That's not why' she answered. 'I think it's because you don't intend to be here very long. You must be planning to go home soon, to return to your comfortable American life. No one can continue the way you do, day in and day out. As for us, we know we will be in this struggle for the rest of our lives. We can't escape it. So we have to learn to rest, to play and pray, to celebrate and have parties, to enjoy our friends and our children.'

[Wallis continues,] Yvonne told me what the refugee women did when they set up new camps. They established three committees: the committee on sanitation, the committee on education, and the committee on joy. Yvonne learned many valuable lessons from the refugees. Now she is one of the best partyers I know, [Wallis writes] even in the midst of her still-important work. I have always marveled at the capacity of the poor to be thankful and joyful. And I'm convinced the two are connected. It is a profound irony to see those who have so little being so thankful for their small blessings, while those with the largest share of the world's good often seem so ungrateful."²

My friends, I think we have the sanitation and education committees functioning pretty well. Perhaps we need to start a committee on joy, within ourselves, within our church, within our community, within our nation.

Life itself is a gift – from the moment of our conception to the hour of our death and beyond... life is a gift, a joy to be shared in unpredictable ways, honored and held preciously dear. Here's the question for today -- how shall we unwrap this gift and find joy in the days to come? Let's work on it together! Let's "rejoice with joy and singing." (Is 35:1)

Let the people say, "Amen."

*"While with an eye made quiet
by the power of harmony,
and the deep power of joy
we see into the life of things."
~ William Wordsworth*

²Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics*, New York: The New Press & Orbis Books, 1994, p. 230-321.