

Church of the Crossroads
Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2006
Neal MacPherson

Advent 3: A COMMUNITY OF JOY

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 1:26-38

In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the word *happiness* appears just once and it is found in the Book of Lamentations! The verse in which the word is found reads:

My soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is.
- Lamentations 3:17

Given this one appearance of the word, one could say that the idea of happiness does not get much play in the Bible. By contrast, it gets major play in our culture. The Declaration of Independence sets forth the pursuit of happiness as one of the basic rights, right there along with life and liberty.

These days just before Christmas we observe lots of people pursuing happiness as they make their way to the shopping centers to purchase those things that presumably will make them happy. A recent article "While Iraq Burns," written by Bob Herbert begins this way:

Americans are shopping while Iraq burns.

The competing television news images on the morning after Thanksgiving were of the unspeakable carnage in Sadr City – where more than 200 Iraqi civilians were killed by a series of coordinated car bombs – and the long lines of cars filled with holiday shopping zealots that jammed the highway approaches to American malls that had opened for business at midnight.

A Wal-Mart in Union, N. J was besieged by customers even before it opened its doors at 5 a.m. on Friday. “All I can tell you,” said a Wal-Mart employee, “is that they were fired up and ready to spend money.”

There is something wrong with the picture. While Iraq burns, Americans pursue their idea of happiness as if nothing were wrong. Now this contemporary pursuit of happiness is probably not quite the thing the founding fathers had in mind when they composed the Declaration of Independence, but in truth this is the way the pursuit has evolved. We believe that things, more and more things, will make us happy. And happy we will be, no matter what is happening in Darfur, or Palestine-Israel, or Iraq. The same article by Bob Herbert describes how so many Americans, young and old, seem to be oblivious as to what is happening elsewhere in the world, and many simply do not seem to care.

Back to the Bible. The Bible certainly does not value happiness, but it surely does value joy.

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
 Shout, O Israel!
 Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
 O daughter Jerusalem!
 - Zephaniah 3:14

Echoes the prophet Isaiah:

Shout aloud, the inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy,
 for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.
 - Isaiah 12:6

And, in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, we read:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I shall say, rejoice.
 - Philippians 4:4

This joy that is celebrated in the Scriptures is not to be confused with happiness. In the Lectionary Study Group last Monday we agreed that happiness is a superficial, surface emotion, and fleeting. Joy is a far deeper emotion, more profound, more a matter of gift and grace. The pursuit of

happiness is unable to come to terms with human suffering, but joy can actually be found in the midst of human deprivation and sorrow.

My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, though far off hymn that hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul – how can I keep from singing.

I learned this ability of joy to reside in the midst of suffering a number of years ago when I undertook an exposure trip to the Philippines and lived a number of days among the poorest of the poor. The joy I witnessed among the people with whom I stayed was genuine and contagious. It had nothing to do with happiness. I witnessed it most particularly in a base Christian community of poor fishermen on the Island of Negros. The members of the community were in a struggle to form a union in order to bargain with the merchants who purchased their fish. They were poor but joyful human beings, not happy, but joyful.

I have often thought of the joy I discovered in those poor fishermen in that far-off place, and I have come to believe that the source of their joy was not in anything we might associate with the pursuit of happiness. The source of their joy was their trust in the realm, the kingdom of God, for which they prayed daily. Every time they got a glimpse of that realm, whether it was in a slight change that turned out to be in their favor, or a newfound courage to continue their struggle for justice, a joy overtook them. They rejoiced and they sang.

Their joy, I believe, is what the scriptures have in mind when they call God's people to rejoice. Those particular scriptures reveal something else that is noteworthy. Each of the passages calling for people to rejoice has an accompanying message, and that is the word to *fear not*.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
The Sovereign, your God, is in your midst.
- Zephaniah 3:16

Declares the prophet Isaiah:

Surely, it is God who saves me,
I will trust God and not be afraid.
- Isaiah 12:6

Said the apostle Paul to the Christians in Philippi:

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything
by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let
your request be made known to God.”
- Philippians 4:5

And the angel Gabriel says to Mary, “Fear not, Mary, for you have found
favor with God. No wonder Mary, unafraid, can turn to rejoicing:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God has looked with favor
on the lowliness of God’s servant.
- Luke 1:46,47

We who belong to the richest nation on earth are so afraid: afraid of
terrorists, afraid of not having enough, afraid of the way we look, afraid of
the stranger, afraid of the future, afraid of death. No wonder we pursue
happiness the way we do, and no wonder there is so little joy in us. We
place our trust in our own pursuit of happiness rather than in God and God’s
kingdom.

But happiness is not only elusive. It is also short sighted. If we could
just let go of our fears, then we might be ready to receive the gift of joy – the
joy that comes not from our possessions, or our successes, or our
achievements, or our talents, or our good looks, but from God and God’s
realm of peace and justice which even now breaks in upon our world and our
lives if only we have but eyes to see and ears to hear.

By now, you have probably realized that I have been giving an
Advent sermon series. The first sermon explored what it means to be a
community of hope; the second a community of peace; and today’s a
community of joy. Next week we will celebrate what it means to be a

community of love as we give thanks for the birth of Emmanuel – God-with-us.

These attributes of hope, peace, joy, and love are each represented by one of the Advent candles, and as we speak of them, they become for us counter-cultural values; that is, these attributes of hope and peace and joy and love, represent alternative values when compared to the ways of our culture. Our culture is officially optimistic rather than hopeful. It lays the groundwork for violence rather than peace. It pursues happiness and has a difficult time experiencing joy. It celebrates self-concern and self-centeredness rather than a love that reaches out to neighbor and to the world.

And yet, it is so important for us to realize that we find ourselves attracted to both sets of values. We, somehow, would like to place our complete trust in God's realm, but we find ourselves caught up in the ways of our world. We may criticize those who rush to the shopping centers the day following Thanksgiving, but many of us have also made our way to the shopping centers this Advent season.

For North American Christians, it is not an easy thing to focus on God's realm. It is not an easy thing to place our trust in God. It is a struggle. And yet, deep inside ourselves, we cannot help ourselves. For, in the end, the ways of our world simply do not fulfill our deepest longings. Not only the poor and deprived of the earth, but we ourselves long for that new life that only God can grant.

That new life we will celebrate next week as we give thanks for the gift of the Child. Once again, we will welcome this sign of God's realm into our lives and the life of this community. Truly, he who is Emmanuel – God-with-us - is the source of our hope, our peace, our joy, and yes, our love.

Therefore, my friends, let us take heart. Let us hold fast to hope and let us practice peace and let us love one another and care for this good earth. In so doing, we take our place in the realm of God as it takes root in our world. And yes, let us rejoice and sing, for God has come, and comes, and will continue to come until that time when all will be well. Joy, joy, joy.