

Seeing Joy

December 16, 2018: The Third Sunday of Advent

[Zephaniah 3:14-20](#); [Isaiah 12:2-6](#); [Philippians 4:4-7](#)

What is that word “rejoice”? It sounds to me, at first, like one of those churchy words--like “salvation” which we talked about last week. Why rejoice? We might say, “I don’t have time for that.” We might say, “I don’t feel comfortable with that. There are children being detained at the border without their families, there are children being shot, there are children who don’t have enough food in a day; we are surrounded, permeated, with inhumane realities, innumerable tragedies. Not only is there not enough joy, there is not enough civility, decency, or basic human care to go around. It would not be fair,” we might think, “to rejoice.”

We might also say, “Well, my own life is pretty difficult. How can I rejoice--what does that even mean--when I’m living with depression, with grief, with worry about how to make ends meet; when I’m worrying about my loved ones, when I worry and wonder about my own life: Do I matter? Do I make a difference?” In the midst of all these questions, where is joy?

And finally, is joy, we might wonder, merely something on our to-do list, that heavy litany that burdens us from above? Is joy one of those things we know we should be doing, feeling, achieving, striving for, yet we know we’re not hitting the mark?

Elizabeth Gilbert, famous for her memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* among other books, writes in [an essay](#) of a man she met while working as a waitress in a diner. He was living without a home of his own and came into the diner frequently, lingered at the counter, chatted with the staff, and made friends with them. Elizabeth describes her friend as “brilliant, erudite, and well-read” and learned that earlier in his life he had trained as a concert pianist yet just as his career was picking up, he “lost his finger in an accident.” He shared with her that he had grown up in a family wherein things needed to be perfect, a family that was “brittle” against the possibility of imperfection, such that he had not experienced “tenderness until he went to the hospital with a crushed finger.” There, the nurses and doctors showed him more kindness and warmth than he had ever received. Elizabeth remembers him one time holding up his hand, showing her the missing finger, and saying, “It was all worth it!”

In a similar conversation, in the American Catholic author Brian Doyle’s novel *Mink River*, a young man asks a dying man, “What mattered to you in your life? What really mattered to you?” The older man answered, among other things, “my children learning to read...fresh bread with way too much butter...sleep in every form...the shivering ache of a saxophone and the yearning of an oboe; folding laundry hot from the dryer...postcards on which the sender has written so much that he or she can barely squeeze a signature...excellent [cutting] knives; the very idea of albatrosses and thesauruses...walruses...all sounds of whatever tone or tenor issued by my children; my children in all the forms of coupled pain and joy, which is to say everything alive, which is to say all prayers.”

What would you add? What would you add to your litany of gladness? For me I would echo everything Brian says about children, one's own children, especially my younger one's unwittingly clever one-liners (he has no idea how funny he is) and my older one's incisive courage to feel - and question - everything. I would add unexpected descants; the snap of dark chocolate; the way wine tastes more alive at the vineyard where it was grown; sun dappling through autumn leaves and glaring upon the red brick of warehouses down the street; gritty rosin applied to the horsehair on string instrument bows (who thought of that? it really works!); trampolines (especially those new indoor places they didn't have when I was a kid--those are awesome); savasana, the final resting pose in yoga, when you get to just lay down and "let the earth hold you"; giggles that only my sister and I share; a couch with just the right proportion of firm and squishy; waves lapping over my toes sinking into cool sand. Oh--the Grand Canyon! The sun setting over the Grand Canyon. Camping at the canyon under a clear night sky watching innumerable stars emerge: just when you think the sky is full of stars, there are more.

God promises Abraham offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky, which first is to say that God will bless Abraham in more ways than he can count. Innumerable, uncountable, infinite will God's blessings be to Abraham and his people and to us. It strikes me as a unique metaphor, because in order to see the stars, in order to see those blessings, it must be really dark. The darker it is, the more stars you can see; just at that moment in the middle of the night when you think it cannot get any darker outside--the sky is beyond pitch black--the more stars appear.

The stars, of course, are always there--whether it's day time or a cloudy night. Jesus *is* our Lord and Savior, whether or not we assent to that intellectually at every given moment. In him we *do* have eternal life, though who among us can imagine what that really means. We *are* the Lord's, as we say when we bury a loved one, whether we live or we die. The Lord *is* near, whether or not we can see or sense that.

So also it may be with joy. Joy always might be there to be found, although, as Brene Brown points out [in *The Gifts of Imperfection*], it "is not a constant. It comes to us in moments... Sometimes we miss out on the bursts of joy because we're too busy chasing" or staging or manufacturing "extraordinary moments. Other times we're so afraid of the dark that we don't dare let ourselves enjoy the light. A joyful life," she wonders, "is not a floodlight of joy [as] that would...become unbearable" just as we could not live with day alone but we need the night. A joyful life "is made up of joyful moments strung together" like Christmas lights, the very same ones with which we adorn our homes, and like stars emerging, one after the other.

Counterintuitively it is in our darkest, scariest, least predictable, most vulnerable times--not our shiniest, safest ones--that "real, mature, sincere joy" is most available to us, is closest to us; "the world is beautiful *and* terrible, and our obligation is to joy" (Elizabeth Gilbert). Let us rejoice then. Let us rejoice *always*. The Lord is near.