***THE JOY OF…***

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Texts: Isaiah 61:10-11 and 1 Thessalonians 5:15-24

 If you were to title a book that you were writing, what title might you choose? Some time ago someone was kind enough to send me a list of titles for children’s books that did not quite make the cut. These included: *Hammers, Chainsaws, and Scissors: An I-Can-Do-It Book*,

 *Curious George and the High-Voltage Fence*, and

 *Fun Four-letter Words to Know, Repeat, and Share*.

By contrast, a lot of folks have concluded that anything with *joy* in the title has the potential to be a big seller. Among the available titles for your reading or listening pleasure are: *The Joy of Bach* and *The Joy of Baseball*, *The Joy of Cooking* and *The Joy of Coffee*, *The Joy of Sex* and *The Joy of Socks*, *The Joy of Painting* and *The Joy of Parenting.* Oddly there is *The Joy of Pi* (as in 3.14159…) but no *Joy of Pie* (as in coconut crème) though there is a *Joy of Baking* with a chapter on pies and tarts. In the literary world and in the rest of the world, people seem hungry for more joy!

 Last weekend here at Covenant we celebrated *The Joy of Sharing Christmas*. Over a hundred of us were involved in one way or another as the joyful story of Jesus’ birth was told through drama, song, and a great Jack tale; friends, neighbors and strangers alike were welcomed with beautiful music, friendly smiles and tasty cookies. Last Saturday morning a couple of hundred neighbors in need gathered in our Great Hall to hear the Christmas story and receive Christmas presents as part of the annual Children’s Christmas party; while our role was largely limited to providing space for that event, it was yet another way to share in the joy of sharing Christmas. This week Covenant women decorated and delivered baskets of Christmas greenery to some of our members, and this afternoon we will go Christmas caroling to the homes of folks in our congregation, carrying to them in cheerful tune or joyful noise the joy of Christmas. Sharing Christmas is a joy, and Christmas is the joy we share!

 The intersection of those joys appears early in the Christmas story when Mary and Elizabeth meet; as Elizabeth describes it, the child in her womb leaped for **joy** in the presence of the child carried by Mary. In response Mary offers her own joyful song in the words of the Magnificat:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,*

*and my spirit* ***rejoices*** *in God my Savior.*

Mary recognizes the glorious truth about the child she bears, a child who will turn the world upside down and fulfill God’s promises to God’s people, a child whose very presence taking shape within her testifies to the power of God for whom all things are possible.

 When Jesus arrives in the dark of night in that Bethlehem stable there is little comment about the family’s reaction, but in those fields where shepherds keep watch over their flocks by night angels burst into full-throated *glorias in excelsis Deo* in celebration of the *tidings of great* ***joy*** *for all people* that they bring, tidings of the birth of a Savior who is the Messiah. Across time angels bring lots of heavenly news to earth, but nowhere are their tidings as joyful and glorious as in those skies over Bethlehem; then again, rarely have angels had such good news to share! The shepherds add their voices to the angelic chorus after visiting the holy family at the stable; they return to the fields “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them,” says Luke.

 Matthew too describes great joy surrounding Jesus’ birth as the magi follow the star in search of the king; when the star stopped over the place where the child was, “they were overwhelmed with joy,” says Matthew. Their search is ended and their gifts presented – gold, frankincense and myrrh – gifts fit for a king. At every turn in the Christmas story there is joy on top of joy on top of joy. Joy from the heavens and joy on earth, for the good news of Christmas is joy for the world in the birth of a Savior!

 It is that joy we share with the world and with each other in this Advent season. It is the joy of expectation, the joy of promise, the joy of new life, the joy of God coming into our midst in the birth of a child – and we share it joyfully. Long before Jesus was born Isaiah described it well:

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God!*

The joy of Christmas is that kind of full-bodied, all pervasive joy!

 In his book *The Redemption of Scrooge* that we are using for our Advent study this year, Matt Rawle remembers Herod’s Slaughter of the Innocents and raises a challenging question:

*Do we have the audacity to sing about joy*

*in the midst of unspeakable atrocities?*

Do we dare to sing glorias with the angels when there is so much suffering in the world, so much conflict in our nation, and so much need in our neighborhoods? Can we sing *Joy to the World* when the world is in so much pain? Rawle’s answer, which is I think the answer of Scripture, is this:

*How do we react when we are faced with Bethlehem – those places of suffering? Some say Bethlehem is an ancient place where countless children were slaughtered at the hands of a fearful king. Some say* ***Bethlehem*** *is on the eastern coast of Africa, in Sudan, where the vulnerable often do not survive…Some say* ***Bethlehem*** *is a shopping mall where a young man ended innocent lives before taking his own. Scripture says Bethlehem was the place in which God came to earth, veiled in flesh, in order to save God’s people. This place of torment and suffering is precisely where God chose to be born so that God, through Christ, could transform tears of sadness into tears of joy.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

God didn’t come to us in Bethlehem **despite** the pain of the world; God came **because** the world was in pain. God came to offer a hopeful, faithful, joyful, healing alternative to the fear, pain and sickness that gripped the world then and which continue to grip the world today. Jesus came into a dangerous world ruled by Rome, by Herod, and by a host of others who would rather see him dead than change the world from the way it was. But he came nevertheless – in the still of the night, in an out-of-the-way stable, birthed by a poor young woman, welcomed by common shepherds fresh from the fields, laid in a manger where he was as vulnerable as any newborn child in history. Two thousand years later we remember that he came that night; we remember it with joy, with bright lights and candles and songs and feasts and presents and good cheer, for Jesus came to offer hope in the midst of despair, healing for a wounded world, and joy to brighten all our days including our darkest days.

 We dare to share the joy of Christmas and sing our glorias in excelsis Deo **because** the world needs that good news– needs good news where the news is not good: in the places where

despair runs deep

 and people mourn

 and racism rears its ugly head

 and violence erupts

 and children suffer

 and cancer strikes

 and refugees (like the holy family) are turned away.

We dare to share the joy of Christmas because the world needs more joy, more hope, more love, more peace, needs the good news of Jesus’ coming and the hope that he brings and the promise of his return, needs the joyful, hopeful good news that God is with us, among us, now more than ever! As Paul tells the Thessalonians:

*Rejoice, always…for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you!*

God’s will is that we should rejoice and sing and light candles and celebrate and hope and share the joy of Christmas, for the joy of Christmas is the joy of Jesus, the joy of God’s coming to us, among us, with us. It is a joy to be shared, a joy to be celebrated with joy throughout this Advent season, throughout the Christmas season, throughout all the seasons of the year and all the seasons of our lives. God’s will is that we should join the angels and the shepherds and the magi and celebrate with joy the joy that we have to celebrate – to us a child is born who is the Savior, Christ the Lord! *Gloria in excelsis Deo* – now and always! Amen

1. Matt Rawle, *The Redemption of Scrooge*, Abingdon Press:Nashville, 2016, p.91 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)