***LET THERE BE…JOY!***

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Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and Luke 1:39-56

Advent is a season of joy, love, anticipation, and in most years – Christmas pageants. Buried somewhere in our family archives is an old movie of my brother, sisters, and me in our living room orchestrating yet another re-creation of the first Christmas. We had the standard props – bathrobes for Joseph and the shepherds, crowns for the magi, a doll to be the baby Jesus (my youngest sister had outgrown the part and the doll was better behaved). We had a script which my youngest sister never followed, perhaps because she could not yet read. The performance fell somewhere between Luke’s cherished account of that first Christmas and the Herdman’s performance in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* in which the wise men bring ham instead of gold, frankincense and myrrh and Gladys, the angel, pushes everyone out of the way to holler: *Hey! Unto you a child is born!* In such pageants the tidings of great joy for all people are often proclaimed with great joy – in some unique way!

Barbara Kirby recalls one Christmas pageant that was unlike any of the other hundred she had experienced. She writes:

*From the start this pageant was different. I don’t ever remember seeing shepherds roll up to a manger in wheelchairs or angels limp along to the heavenly chorus. This time the shepherds, angels and wise men were our cerebral palsied children. Did you ever try to dress in robe and halo a little one whose arms and legs jerked spastically in all directions? I was beginning to wonder if all this tremendous effort was going to be worth it. Three wise men in paper crowns, all arriving at the same time, came walking through parallel bars instead of riding on camels. Their gifts fairly leaped from spastic fingers to the baby’s feet. Mary sat silently, arms folded across her blue robe, as with a faraway, wistful look in her eyes she hummed ‘Away in a Manger’. She doesn’t talk. The joy of one little shepherd was such that his arm flew awry and knocked his turban over one eye, but never has any shepherd been so glad to see the Babe in the manger. No smile has ever matched his in radiance as he tried to sing ‘Away in a Manger’. Little angels with shining eyes under foil halos were singing, ‘Joy to the world, the Lord has come!’ – and somehow it seemed that they knew this joy and their Lord, this Baby Jesus. Yes, I know it’s the same old story, but this was not done in quite the same old way. If in all of this, these little ones can know God’s love and joy, why do I, so much older and wiser, doubt God’s love and miss God’s joy*?[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is a good question. Why is it that we ever doubt God’s love, and why do we allow the joy of this joyful season to escape us so often? It is there in our words, for we sing ***Joy*** *to the World* and *O Come all ye Faithful,* ***joyful*** *and triumphant,*

we read of the angels’ *tidings of great* ***joy*** *for all people* and

of Mary’s *spirit that* ***rejoices*** in God her savior,

we bid friends: *Merry Christmas* and *Happy Holidays*,

but in our hearts, we often embrace Christmas with tepid joy or even Scrooge-like reluctance. Is it because we’ve walked this path to Bethlehem so many times that we no longer are surprised by the angel voices and the tidings of great joy for all people? Is it because we doubt the joy is real when the same streets in which the everlasting light first shined are still wracked by violence and conflict 2,000 years later? Is it because the pace of our 21st century lives is too hectic or our anxieties too great to allow for much joy? Or have we simply forgotten how to be joyful, especially in the midst of this persistent pandemic?

The prophet Isaiah had no such problem. In recounting his calling *to bring good tidings to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and to comfort all who mourn*, he declares:

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;*

*my whole being shall exult in my God!*

For the prophet, joy is a full-body experience. Like the exuberance of sports fans at a last second winning score or a crowd rising for a standing ovation at a concert, words are not enough; his body, soul, and spirit rejoice! The good news he proclaims fills him to overflowing, so that he has *joy like a fountain* in his soul! The good news he proclaims will transform tears to smiles, despair to hope, sadness to gladness! It is the kind of good news of which Mary sings in her Magnificat as God turns the world upside down and lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things.

The joy of Christmas is not first and foremost the joy of receiving presents or eating gingerbread cookies or being together or singing Christmas carols – joyful as those experiences are. The joy of Christmas is the good news of a Savior who is Christ the Lord, God with us in a wonderfully tangible way that is hard for us to fully grasp, yet easy for us to remember in word and song and pageant - *the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay*! It is joy that permeates not only pageants, but also the holy family whose story the pageants tell.

Consider Joseph. Upon learning of Mary’s pregnancy he resolves to

divorce her quietly rather than subject her to public humiliation. How angry, sad, and shaken he must have been to learn that the young virgin he was to marry was no virgin at all as proved by her swelling belly! Did he weep or did he rage or did he simply set his jaw with stoic firmness? We are not told. What we are told is that in a dream an angel told Joseph good news: Mary had been faithful to him and this child conceived by the Holy Spirit would save God’s people from their sins; he would be called Emmanuel, God with us. Joseph went to sleep with a heavy heart; he awoke with a fresh and determined spirit inspired by an angel. His sadness was turned to awed joy, for the child Mary carried was the child of God, and Joseph had a role to play in the child’s life and in God’s plan!

Consider Mary. From out of nowhere an angel appears to her with a message that perplexed her, a message of great promise and hope for God’s people, but a message of fearful consequence for her. How wonderful that a Son of God would come to earth, that the throne of David would be reestablished! How strange that she, a poor peasant girl, should have a role in it. How strange that she should bear a child when still a virgin, and that the child should be the savior! Mary’s response to the angel is an obedient one, “*let it be with me according to your word.*” But there is more awe and humility than joy in her voice until Elizabeth confirms the good news as the child within her leaps for joy. Then Mary bursts forth with familiar words that bubble over with gladness:

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*

Mary’s joy is in the power of

the Lord who could lift her up from poverty to blessedness,

the Lord who could turn the world upside down,

the Lord who remembered and loved and was merciful to God’s people,

the Lord who does great things for the poor and lowly, for each and every one!

Mary’s anxieties or uncertainties or doubts are swept away in a cascade of joy that has resounded through the ages as the Magnificat – a joyous affirmation of God’s hand at work in and through her life.

Christmas is about the coming of Christ, and the coming of Christ is about joy for all people – joy for Mary and Joseph, joy for you and me and the fishes in the deep blue sea, joy for all creation! Joy came to Mary and Joseph in the midst of Roman occupation in the middle of the night. Joy comes to us where we are – in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, even in the midst of a pandemic, even in the midst of a president’s pathological pique, even in the midst of the uncertainties of life and of living these days, for the joy of Christmas is the joy of Emmanuel, God with us, God present in our midst as a sign of God’s love for the world. It is joy that is restrained only by whatever restraints we place upon it, for this joy is rooted in the savior who is Christ the Lord.

If you do not feel that joy, I wonder why. Is it that you take that good news for granted? Do you have too much weighing you down to feel excited and joyful these days? It has been a while since we have had reason to be overly joyful. This year has been described as one giant dumpster fire! Perhaps then it is the right time and the right place to hear the story anew and to embrace the joy and hope it offers. This year, as you hear again the tidings of great joy for all people and hum *Joy to the World* one more time, dare to be joyful – truly joyful, unrestrainedly joyful in body, soul, and spirit! Dare to let go of the burdens of these pandemic days that are weighing us all down, and embrace the good news of Christ’s coming with childlike, wide-eyed wonder and joy. The world will tell you there is little reason to rejoice in the midst of all our pain these days; but the voices of angels tell us there are

Glorias in excelsis Deo to be sung,

laughter and love to be shared,

joy to be proclaimed,

even in the midst of the viral surge, for Jesus Christ is born! God is indeed with us. The savior – our savior – comes! *Alleluia!* Amen

1. Barbara Kirby, quoted in *All About Christmas*, James A. Simpson, Gordon Wright Publishing: Edinburgh, 1994, p.35 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)