

“JOY IS OUR TRUE HOME”

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 December 17, 2017

Since we enjoyed the Sunday School and Methodist Youth sharing with us today, I thought I'd begin with a little story about some Sunday School children: The children were lined up for snacks during Sunday school. At the head of the table was a large tray of apples. The teacher wrote a note and posted it on the apple tray: “Take only ONE. God is watching.”

Moving along the snack line, at the other end was a large tray of chocolate chip cookies. A girl wrote this note, which she put next to the tray of cookies: “Take all you want. God is watching the apples.”

This week is the third in the Advent series titled “Coming Home.” Our journey toward Bethlehem so far has been a rough one. But this week, we have heard from the Apostle Paul, writing his very first letter to the Thessalonians—the earliest piece of writing in the New Testament. What is the subject of Paul's letter to the earliest Christian community? *Joy*. Specifically, joy in the midst of difficult nights.

The Psalmist writes,
Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:4-4, NRSV)

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning!
As I think about the season of Advent, and read from Thessalonians on this third week into our journey, I can't help but hear traces of the Psalmist in Paul's words:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,

Give thanks in all circumstances;

For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Do not quench the Spirit,

Do not despise the words of prophets,

But test everything.

Hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Some of you might remember the TV show *HeeHaw*. It had a lot of bluegrass and country music. Folks were laying around in the hay, thinking about going down to the corner of town to watch the stop light turn green. It had other characters that made impressions on us. *HeeHaw* also had Grady Nutt. Grady was a Baptist preacher, a comedian, and he came to be known as the *Prime minister of humor*. Tragically, he died in the 1980's in an airplane crash. Grady Nutt had a saying, "Laughter is the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world."

Laughter is God's gift of joy. It is a gift that we very much need in these days, in these holidays, when in a world of terrorism and road rage, estrangement and outsourcing, nuclear threats and sexual harassment charges, **all is not calm and all is not bright**. The writer of the Proverbs knew about this gift and our need for it: A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones. (Proverbs 17:22)

There is something about humor that brings us to life, and the scriptures hint at all of this: The prophet Isaiah: **I will greatly rejoice in the Lord**. The psalmist: **Our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy**. And the Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians: **Rejoice always**. We all need something that brings us to life, like a desert rejoicing and blossoming, like water in the desert.

Have you heard any good jokes lately?" Just that comment is enough to bring us out of the doldrums, to life our spirits, to fill us with anticipation. Danny

Morris, who spent most of his life with the *Upper Room* in Nashville tells this one: There was a cantankerous, crabby old man. His neighbors avoided him. His four boys moved away from home as soon as they could. You get the picture. His poor wife was long suffering in her presence.

One night he went to bed and just slipped away.

His four boys were called in. What should they do? “He was hard to live around, and no one could get along with him, but he was our pa. We owe him a decent burial, out in the meadow beyond the field.” So they went out to the barn and found some boards and made a casket. They put the box on their shoulders and carried it out past the barn. As they passed through the gate, one of the boys bumped into the post and this caused them to drop the box. The casket broke open and the cantankerous, crabby old man sat straight up.

He had only been in a very deep...sleep!

Well, life got back to normal. He lived two more years, just as onery and mean, cantankerous and crabby as ever. The boys could go back to their homes, but his poor wife had to stay with him.

Then one night he went to bed and just slipped away.

His four boys were called in. What should they do now? “Well, he was hard to live around, and no one could get along with him, but he was our pa. We owe him a decent burial, out in the meadow beyond the field.” So they went out to the barn and found some boards and made a casket, and put the old man in it. They put the box on their shoulders and started out of the house. And as they did their mother, the old man’s wife said, “Boys, when you get out by the barn...be careful going through that gate.”

We need humor in our lives. It is like **the hand of God on the**

shoulder of a troubled world. It is like the desert rejoicing and blossoming. In the midst of laughter, it is as if the sorrow and sighing flees away. The message of the prophet Isaiah is so relevant for us because it acknowledges the pain and the loss and the devastation the people had been through; and at the same time, it points to something beyond the present condition.

The creation will be renewed.

The ruined cities will be rebuilt.

The exiles will come home.

The oppressed will hear the good news.

Those who mourn will be comforted.

Near the end of his life, Jesus gathered his disciples and said to them, “You will weep and mourn, you will have pain, but your pain will be turned to joy. No one will take your joy from you...In the world you will have persecution. And then he says, in the King James version, “But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.” (John 16:20,33)

Jim Harnish, a Methodist pastor in Tampa, Florida, expands this idea of the importance of laughter and joy in our lives. He writes: *“The resonant laughter echoing from heaven is not cheap, shallow, watery frivolity; it is rich, deep, vivid joy. It is gladness that comes from the same place as suffering; joy comes from the same place as tears. It is the joy of men and women who face the suffering, injustice and pain of the world in all its fury, but have taken hold of something stronger, deeper and more powerful. They have grasped the assurance of the ultimate triumph of the goodness of God. They are of good cheer because they know that the power of God in Jesus Christ has overcome the world.”*

When we are most pressed, when we are most stressed, what is needed

is not the serious and the somber, but something else: **The hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world.** We need to laugh. “**Rejoice,**” Paul writes the Thessalonians...**do not quench the spirit!** And what is the fruit of that spirit? **Joy.** Sometimes, even in the toughest times, we need an experience of joy.

Now, I think I might have time for one more short story: For their pastor’s birthday, the little country congregation decided to give him a fancy new suit. He was so touched that the following Sunday he tearfully announced, “Today I preach to you in my birthday suit!”

In closing, my friends, nobody said the journey was going to be easy. Maybe it is for the best that Advent always starts off with a hard dose of reality. But as we enter the homestretch of the season and begin final preparation not only to celebrate the birth of Christ into the world and his coming again in final glory, but also to welcome friends and family member who are coming down home, some of whom might not be gathering with good intentions, let us not quench the Spirit. Let it be in a spirit of grace that we acknowledge that for many of us, welcoming guests or going home will never resemble in any way the pictures of perfect familial bliss that we seen in the constant barrage of photoshopped advertisements, holiday television specials, and Christmas movies. Nevertheless, let us enter into this time with rejoicing, prayer, and giving thanks, for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for us. For no matter how hard the journey may be some days, we know that joy is our true home.

And finally, let us not just hear the blessing of Paul for the Thessalonians as a nice ending, but as a blessing for each one of us.

May the God of peace sanctify us entirely. May our spirits and our souls and our bodies be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.