

THE TRAIL MARKERS OF ADVENT

3) Joy!

Psalm 126

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(Photo on Screen before Ron speaks)

For those of us old enough to remember the fall of the Berlin Wall, the images of its destruction and Germany's restoration are forever etched in our minds.

(Slide Show: Remaining Five Images of the wall being torn down and people rejoicing)

After enduring nearly three decades of friends, family, and a nation divided, the people of Germany rejoiced in their reunion with an exuberance and a joy that captivated the world. As we watched their tears and embraces and celebrations, we could not help but experience their joy vicariously. It was almost as if we were there! Almost as if we a wall had been torn down inside of us! And I suspect that was because in a profound sense, it had. That moment of Germany's jubilation was a moment that almost everyone in the human family could understand. For I am inclined to believe that there is no joy quite like the joy of reunion and restoration.

As we travel together on the Advent trail that leads to Bethlehem, we are relying upon the trail markers of hope, peace, joy and love. On this the third Sunday of Advent, we turn our attention to the trail maker of joy. As we do so, allow me to ask, "Where is the joy in your life these days? Where does joy live? Where does it come from? When is the last time you felt genuine joy?"

My guess is that for some of us, it's been a while. Oh, I know that we often talk a lot about joy in this season. We sing about joy and we read about joy and we think about joy...but more often than we would like, genuine joy seems to escape us. Now, please understand that I am talking about more than just the "warm fuzzys" that our culture craves and so often creates in an attempt to manufacture joy. Manufactured joy—in the form products to consume or experiences to purchase—rarely seems to last. It may linger for a moment or two, but that moment quickly fades with the passing of time and we are left feeling empty once more.

For the record, that is not the type of joy that I am referring to this morning. The trail marker of joy points us in a very different direction than the one so often taken by our culture. It points us in the direction of a conviction that is not dependent upon the fleeting feeling of happiness, but upon the profound trust that even in the midst of the brokenness and pain that is an inevitable part of life, God is at work—bringing healing and wholeness and hope. The great irony, of course, is that this kind of joy is so often experienced only in those moments when we recognize that we are broken and then allow God to heal us and make us whole once more. There is, you see, no joy like the joy of being lost and then

found, broken and made whole. Eugene Peterson offers the paraphrased beatitude that suggests that “you’re blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and God’s rule.

Could there be a greater joy, for example, than that experienced by the people of Berlin when, after three decades of division and fear, the wall came tumbling down? Theirs’ was a joy that money could not buy—a joy that couldn’t be manufactured—a joy that transcended all the cheap imitations that posed as joy. For it was only because they had known what it was like to be broken that they could experience the full joy of being made whole once more.

In our featured Psalm of the morning, I imagine that the Psalmist could identify with the experience of those Berliners. For the Psalmist and his people had endured a great division of their own—a division brought about by fifty years of exile. With some separated from their homeland and the people that they loved, they had struggled to find meaning and hope in a foreign land. But the time eventually came when those living in Babylon were allowed to return home. In the first three verses of Psalm 126, the Psalmist reflects upon the extraordinary experience of joy that swept over his people in that moment.

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” (Psalm 126: 1-2)

What a joyful return that must have been! Can you imagine the tears and the embraces and the laughter that echoed over the narrow streets of Jerusalem? A divided people had been reunited! And every day life held a sweetness to be savored. Even the ordinary events of every day had an extraordinary taste to them!

Yet, there is, once again, a longing expressed by the Psalmist, a pleading with God to restore the fortunes of God’s people. In verse 4 we read: **“Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed of sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”**

Perhaps you’ve noticed that in each of the Psalms we have used thus far to guide us through Advent, there is a plea for God’s restoration. **“Restore us, O God!”** is the thread woven through each of these texts. In spite of the fact that the faithfulness of God had been demonstrated in the great joy of return from exile and the resulting reunion, there is a keen awareness that the need for God’s restoring presence and power is not limited to the past, but very much needed in the present. In this sense then, the Psalmist seems to recognize that the need for the joy of God’s restoring love is one that we as human beings never outgrow. It is a need that is ever before us—both in times of exile and in times of return and reunion.

The theme of exile and return, of course, is one of the great over arching themes of the biblical story. While we can date Israel’s exile to Babylon as lasting from 597 to 538 BCE (nearly 60 years), there is at work in this ancient story, a truth that transcends the actual historical reality. **And that truth is this: the story of exile and return is, essentially, a story that**

applies not only to Israel at a specific time in its history, but also to humanity and the reality of our relationship with God. Life as we have often come to know it, is a continuing saga of exile, return and rejoicing. This is the theme that continually plays itself out in the unfolding story of our present day lives. While it is not likely that many of us have known what it means to live in exile in a physical sense, many of us do understand what it means to live in spiritual exile...or emotional exile...social exile. We do understand what it feels like to be separated and alienated from the life, the people, the God that we long for.

In this sense then, exile and return is a metaphor for the human condition—a metaphor that most all of us can understand and many of us can identify with. In this sense then, Israel's story is indeed, our story. So it is that we can join with the Psalmist in offering our personal plea: **“Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” (Psalm 126: 4-5)**

The trail marker of joy serves to remind us that in a culture that seeks desperately to manufacture joy...a culture in which there are many cheap imitations of joy, genuine joy is not something that can be purchased and consumed as if it were a product on the Super Market shelf. Genuine joy is, instead, to be found in the deeper awareness that for every experience of exile and alienation, there is the road made straight in the wilderness, a path that invites our return home to the people that wait for us, the life that we long for, and the God that we love.

In our lesson from Luke's Gospel, we find the familiar story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth at the time when both of them were expecting. Elizabeth, of course, is moved by the fact that Mary would be the one to visit her: **“Why is it,”** she asks, **“that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”** Then she adds that delightful line that speaks volumes: **“For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”** (Luke 1: 43-44)

In relaying this story of the exchange between Mary and Elizabeth, Luke is making the editorial statement that Mary's child will indeed be one who causes not only John the Baptist, but humanity itself, to leap for joy. Jesus would indeed bring joy to our world as he proclaimed the restoring power of God's love—a love that would make a way in the wilderness for an exiled people to return home to the God who waited for them. Where is the joy in your life this morning? Not the manufactured product that masquerades as joy, but the genuine joy that arises out of the experience of returning home—of being restored to the life and the relationships that we long for. Do you know that joy? If not, the invitation is before you...

I recently read the personal account of a man by the name of Andreas Ramos as he described the experience of being at the wall in Berlin on that November night in 1989 when it came crashing down. This is how he described that amazing experience...

We finally reached the border just after midnight. The East German border was always a serious place. Armed guards kept you in your car, watching for attempts at escapes. Tonight was a different country. Over 20,000 East and West Germans were gathered there in a huge party: as each car came through, people cheered and clapped. East

Germans drove through the applause, grinning, dazed, as thousands of flashbulbs went off. The traffic jam was spectacular.

The cloud of light turned out to be the headlights of tens of thousands of cars in a huge cloud of exhaust fumes. We got out of the car and began walking. Between lanes of cars, streams of people were walking, talking together. Under one light, a group of musicians were playing violins and accordions and men and women were dancing in circles. Despite the brilliantly cold night, car windows were open and everyone talked to each other.

We met people from Belgium, France, Sweden, Spain, England: they had all left their homes and come to see the wall be torn down. Germans were drunk with joy. Everyone spoke in all sorts of languages and half languages. French spoke German and Spaniards spoke French and everyone spoke a bit of German.

Along with everyone else headed towards Berlin were thousands of East Germans; they had been in West Europe for a blitz tour with the kids and grandmother in the back, to look around and drive back again. Without passports, they had simply driven through the borders. Amused West European border guards let them pass. They smiled and waved to everyone.

Now that's joy! The joy of a people reunited! The joy of a city restored! The joy of a nation made whole. And it provides, I think, a brief glimpse of the joy that the Psalmist remembered and the joy that the Psalmist yet longed for; the joy made possible by a God who leads the exiles home and sets the captives free...a God who restores the broken and refreshes the weary...a God whose great love for us would be made known to us in the birth of a baby, born in a manger...a baby who would, one day, invite our bruised and broken world to leap for joy. Amen!