

“The Gift of Gladness” CHC 1-3-12

Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-18

There are a lot of things that can make one glad in this life. The company making ‘Glad’ bags would have us be glad that we can put a sandwich or other food items in one of their bags. Only in America would we think to market gladness.

We are glad when good things happen. This last week the crawl space in our house filled up with water due to the failure of a sump pump. We discovered it through the pest control people whom we called out to the house due to an excessive number of ants crawling out from under the stove. We were led to take a look at the crawl space which was, behold, at capacity with water. That was the culprit. The ants built an ark and floated to safety under the stove. They found land!

Betty and I were officially ‘glad’ when two days of water removal was complete, along with a new functioning sump pump. Of course, the gladness ended with receipt of the bill.

We agree with Webster who defines gladness as experiencing pleasure, being satisfied, causing joy or delight, made pleased, grateful.

Remember Pollyanna? She comes to an embittered town to live with her cold and stern spinster aunt. Along the way she confronts its attitude with her determination to look for the best in life. Her philosophy of life centers on “The Glad Game”, an approach to life that centers on finding something to be glad about in every situation. She teaches a hell fire and damnation pastor to start looking at the glad texts in the bible, transforming his preaching.

We read one of those ‘glad’ texts in our Jeremiah passage this morning; “I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow”.

In life we know things by their opposites. We appreciate joy only in the context of having mourned. Gladness surfaces when sorrows are relieved. We have perspective.

Jeremiah 30 and 31 are known as the Book of Consolation. Israel and Judah will be ransomed by God from the Babylonian Exile and restored to their ancestral home. The people had suffered for their spiritual adultery. Jesus tells us “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). Israel suffered from a wandering heart.

God’s call upon our lives is always at risk. It may be undermined by temptation, prosperity, and the blessings of success. The more successful the calling becomes, “the more vulnerable it will be again to its tendency to undermine itself” (“The Call”, Os Guinness, p.140).

Cotton Mather, one of the great Puritan pastors, writes in ‘Magnalia Christi Americana’ these words, “Religion brought forth prosperity and the daughter destroyed the mother”. The success of the early Puritans, brought about by their focused faith and work ethic, had made them “diligent in the world but

dead to it" (p.140). How do we stay alive to who God is and what God is doing in our lives and world? How do we stay on track and faithful to God's call?

Jeremiah tells us that even though the people were being seduced from their calling and unfaithful, God remains faithful, inviting them to take a journey home. God will not abandon the familial relationship. The return will be celebrated even by the surrounding nations. Upon return there will be a great festival of food and drink satisfying everyone. God loves a party.

That is God. God is a God of grace, ready to bless and throw a party with each of us who returns from a foreign land. That foreign land is the place where we have been blind to God's vision for our lives, where we try to live life on our own terms. So we need to relocate our hearts closer to God. Is that something you need to take care of in this New Year?

Presbyterian writer and preacher, Frederick Buechner, tells of an event which influenced him to go to seminary. After church one Sunday in December he overheard someone ask another, "Are you going home for Christmas?" He had just listened to a sermon in which the preacher kept asking the question, "Are you going home for Christmas?" He was asking it in a way that brought tears to his eyes, home being a metaphor for worshipping, finding the soul's solace and peace before the Christ Child lying in the manger. Their hearts and minds are focused on the face of God incarnate lying so vulnerable in that place.

I'll allow Buechner to express himself; "Home is where Christ is was what the preacher said that winter morning, and when the next autumn I found myself to my great surprise putting aside whatever career I thought I might have as a writer and going to Union Seminary instead at least partly because of the tears that kept coming to my eyes, I don't believe that I consciously thought that home was what I was going there in search of, but I believe that was the truth of it" (Homiletics, Jan.-Feb., 2016, p.11, from Buechner, 'Secrets In The Dark: A Life in Sermons, Zondervan, 2007, p.234).

John uses this metaphor of home in his prologue. "In the beginning" lies outside the normal calculations of time. There, in the cosmic pre-existence of the Word of God we are directed to what follows. Everything we know and see has come into being through Christ who lives outside the limits of time and place, but moves into our time-bound world. He brings light and life'. Ours is the world of God's creation. This is the home God made. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him". But there is a glitch... "Yet the world did not know him".

There is nothing world denying, body-denying, or materiality-denying here, as one finds in many faiths. As one commentator observes, "We might have expected the Word to become flesh and be disgusted with embodiment. Instead, the Word shines with glory, like the faces of the Israelites dancing as they return from exile" (Sojourners, Jan. 2016, p.48).

Job, in his suffering, cries out to God, asking, "Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees?" (Job 10:4)

When actor Hugh Franklin died of cancer, his wife, writer Madeline L'Engle wrote: "It is when things go wrong, when the good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to evaporate that God is most present. We do not need the sheltering wing when things go smoothly. We are closest to God in the darkness, when we stumble along blindly".

Why? Because Jesus is there in the darkness with us, shining in that darkness when perceived with the eyes of faith. Light and life are symbols of the Word present to sustain creation. In Jesus God does have eyes of flesh, becomes acquainted with grief, taking upon himself our humanity. God is not mute. As Martin Luther said, we would "draw Christ as deep as possible into the flesh" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.412). In him we discover the light we need to see, the life we need to keep living.

This is the same God who brings gladness out of sorrow, leading the people home from exile. This is the same God who stoops down into the mess of our lives waiting for us to take his hand. And yet we hear these wistful words from John, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him". How can one who brings such love be so unloved? So unrecognized?

Love is not a normal way of describing what happens between people and their God. Phillip Yancey notes that "not once does the Koran apply the word love to God. Aristotle stated bluntly, "It would be eccentric for anyone to claim that he loved Zeus"---or that Zeus loved a human being, for that matter". In contrast, the Christian faith affirms, testified in scripture, that "God is love". "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1John 4:10). So John in his prologue is showing us that love is the main reason God enters the world in Christ in order to call us home, to make us glad (Yancey, p.414). God's love is the cause of our capacity to love.

John pulls us in to the heart of the matter. He invites us to consider this reality of God in human flesh. "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God". Receive. Believe.

Have you ever just sat and allowed God to love you? Therese of Lisieux lay in a convent infirmary, unable to sleep. Her sister Celine looks in on her and asks what she was doing. "I am praying", Therese responds. "And what are you saying to God?" her sister asks. Therese says, "I am saying nothing. I am loving him". It was St. John of the Cross who described this silent love as the language God hears the best" (Albert Haase, O.F.M., "Coming Home to Your True Self", p.89). In the presence and reality of God's love one can only receive what is given and believe in the reality of the love which surrounds us.

Spirituality is responding and entering in to that reality of God's love present in Christ. John is telling us that following Christ is a matter of engaging him who is of a different world with a different reality, different energies, different possibilities, and different prospects. God in Christ comes into this world, his world, to engage and claim back that which belongs to him. (Guinness, p.158).

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth....From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace".

This is a good description of Epiphany, a day celebrated after Christmas. On the church calendar it is officially celebrated this Wednesday, January 6th. Also known as 'Three Kings' Day', Epiphany is a Christian feast day celebrating the revelation of God as a human being in Jesus Christ. The presence of the three kings worshipping the child lying in the manger represents the revealing of Christ to the Gentiles.

Around this table we receive grace upon grace. This is the table of gladness. Christ is being revealed to us. Each of us brings our own set of needs on this first Sunday of the New Year. Whatever they might be, the Risen Christ is present through the Holy Spirit, saying to each one of us these words of hope from Jeremiah; "I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow".

Let us be open to his Epiphany.