

## **“Living on Borrowed Joy”**

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2020

Psalm 126 ~ 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5:16-24 ~ John 1:6-8, 19-28

Can you believe how controversial Christmas has become? Some clergy media hounds continue to lead a crusade against big department store chains and media corporations who use “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas” in their advertising. The very people who have always complained about the commercialization of Christmas are angry because Christmas is not being emphasized enough by those commercial interests. They call it religious persecution!

Their whole campaign is ridiculous in my opinion. It reflects an embarrassingly uncharitable and unchristian attitude towards non-Christians, who are not only equal citizens in our democracy but equally beloved of God according to the Christian Bible that *I* read. But the most amazing part of this campaign is the absurd notion that the eighty per cent of our population who are self-identified as Christian are being persecuted by the other twenty per cent.

Are they that narcissistic? There are people in this world who are persecuted for being Christian ... their human rights are abused ... their participation in society is curtailed ... their property is confiscated ... their bodies are jailed and tortured and killed because they profess faith in Jesus Christ. How can any Christian call our experience as American Christians “persecution” because a store clerk greets us with “happy holidays?” It’s an insult to our brothers and sisters in other places whose suffering is real.

Haven’t they read their history? Don’t they understand what actual persecution is? Life was hard in the early church. To begin with, all life was harder then than it is today. They didn’t have the modern medicines and the modern conveniences that we enjoy. Life expectancy was shorter, and the mortality rate was higher than any we’ve known in our lifetime. But life was harder still for those early Christians because they were Christians living in an unchristian world.

The early Christians understood what persecution was. They suffered for their faith. They lived under governments hostile to their convictions. They personally knew the martyrs. They also lived by a stricter discipline and a different set of values than the culture around them. A hard life, and yet by most accounts they were known for their kindness and generosity towards non-Christians and a surprising and contagious joy. They took Paul seriously when he said “*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*” How do you explain that?

For instance, when everybody else was hunkering down for winter and still celebrating the fall harvest ... getting ready for the great pagan party in the Roman culture celebrating the winter solstice ... these early Christians were preparing to celebrate the birthday of their Savior. Not with parties and games. They declared a season of somber penitence. They remembered the way the world was before the Savior came. They considered the suffering and injustice and struggle still so prevalent in their time and they renewed their longing that the Savior would return ... that God would intervene to set all things right. But in the meantime, and believe me, the meantime was a *mean* time ... they suffered the hard realities of life along with everybody else. This season of preparation they named “Advent,” from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “Coming.” They were anticipating the coming of God ... and for God to set things right.

They didn’t turn on their neighbors and wag their fingers in criticism. They didn’t whine and complain about how misunderstood and mistreated they were. They turned *within* and reflected on *their* own failure to live up to God’s best hopes for their lives. Advent was a serious and somber time of getting ready to meet God.

But in the midst of this serious and somber season, they just couldn’t hold back some anticipatory celebration. It wasn’t time yet, but they sang some Christmas carols. It wasn’t time yet, but they found themselves smiling, laughing, and throwing a party or two. As the season wore on, their spiritual reflection and discipline ... the reawakening of their faith in Advent ... began to pay off. They *knew* Christmas was coming ... they *knew* God would intervene ... and they *knew* that the merciful God of grace would be kind and forgiving. They

said, “Won’t it be great when no child goes hungry?” “Won’t it be wonderful when we don’t have any more people without safe shelter?” “Won’t it be beautiful when there will be no enemies, only friends ... no outsiders, only the beloved community ... no ‘have-nots,’ only ‘haves?’” “Won’t it be amazing to live in a place where there is no hatred, no hostility, no jealousy, no disease, no suffering, no rejection, no injustice, but only peace and love all the time? To borrow Zora Hurston’s phrase, “their eyes were watching God.” They believed in God. They trusted God’s promises. God had promised a better world to come ... the world that God gave them the ability to imagine. And because that promised world was as good as God’s Word, they began to rejoice. They just couldn’t help themselves. Over time, the third Sunday in Advent came to be called Gaudete Sunday, which means “rejoicing.” The candle that we lit today represents that joy which comes from our anticipation of the future that God has promised. What did our psalm say today? *“Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves”* (Psalm 126:6).

I have seen this remarkable phenomenon of an inexplicable joy. I have worshipped in some churches where most of the people were desperately poor ... their clothes old and tattered ... their daily lives harder than anything I’ve ever known. But they laughed, they shouted ... yes, they shouted ... they were all “hallelujah!” and “amen.” They sang: “This joy I have/The world didn’t give to me/This joy I have, the world didn’t give to me/This joy I have, the world didn’t give to me/No, the world didn’t give it; the world can’t take it away!” How do you explain that? Were they in denial? Didn’t they know how many people are better off than they? Why weren’t they angry or depressed or full of complaint?

I have been with people nearing their last breath, gathering family and friends to say goodbye. But they laughed. They told stories. They talked about times together to come. How do you explain that? Were they overmedicated? Didn’t they love this life? Why weren’t they scared or sad or angry?

I have been around some folks who lost everything in Hurricane Katrina. Everything. All their property – gone! Their entire livelihood – gone! A number of them lived in my dorm at

seminary and their whole way of life had been erased! But they smiled. They were gracious. They were generous. They were helping other people. An older African-American man who lived on my hall spent at least an hour unburying my car that had been encased in an awful ice and snow storm. He smiled the whole time he dug. How do you explain that? Was he faking it? Didn't those Katrina refugees know that whole cities just fifty or sixty miles on either side were spared all the loss they suffered? Why weren't they overcome or depressed or angry?

Of course, not everybody in such hard circumstances responds so positively. And who can blame them? But what amazes me are those people who did exhibit grace and courage and happiness in the face of their personal calamity. How do you explain that?

I suspect they are living on "borrowed joy." We all have down days. Sometimes we have down times, sad or struggling spells that may last a few weeks at a time. In these hard passages, we remember happier days. And sometimes that makes us feel worse, because we worry whether we will ever see those happy times again. But as Christians we have more than "happy days gone by" to remember. We trust in God's promise of "happier times to come." We believe, as Jurgen Moltmann said, that being Christian means "Jesus Christ is our future." So, we live on borrowed joy. As we contemplate God's time to come ... as sure as the Word of God ... we begin to feel some of the joy that we will know then. We sing. We laugh. We tell stories. We talk of times together to come. And we rejoice!

Whenever we come to the Lord's table, as we did last week, we look to the past. We remember what Jesus suffered at our hands. We remember what he endured for us. And we grieve. But we also look to the present moment. We recognize his presence among us. We hear his call to sacrificial service and are joined to one another by the reality that the One whom we crucified is risen ... and with us. And we also come to the table to look to the future ... to the day of the Lord when we will join the everlasting "table prepared" and share the surprising ... all surpassing grace of God's presence together with all God's beloved children. And we rejoice! May we pray?

Savior,

So often we live with a sort of bravado in spite of the hard circumstances we face or see others suffering in our world. But today, in this moment, let us borrow a bit of the joy you have promised will one day be ours in whole. And let our courage, our hope, our peace, our faith, our love be real as we rejoice in the name of Jesus. Amen.