

"Making way for joy"

Sermon Preached At Foundry United Methodist Church

By Dean Snyder

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Second Sunday of Advent

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 1-5; Mark 1: 1-10

Advent is a journey to joy. Advent is a journey to "Joy to the World; the Lord has Come." Advent is a journey to "glad tidings of comfort and joy."

But Advent can be a disappointment. What if joy doesn't come?

The problem is that joy is not a commodity that can be produced, bought, sold or stolen. We can't get joy on discount at J.C. Penny's. We can't buy joy in a mug at Peppers. We can't download joy. We can't lobby for it. We can't legislate it. We can't win it in a lawsuit. We can't seduce it. We can't turn it on with a remote control. We can't earn it. And we can't inherit it.

Like all expressions of the grace of God, joy is a gift that we can only receive. Joy, is an expression of God's free grace.

Theologically, when we talk about grace being free, we don't mean that grace is inexpensive. What we mean is that grace is free in the sense of being emancipated. Grace is free because we can't enslave it. Grace is free because we can't be its master. Joy is an expression of God's grace -- we can't control it, we can't manufacture it, we can't tell it what to do. It can't be bought at any price.

Fred Buechner distinguishes between happiness and joy: We can get a sense of happiness in our life, he says, from things that we do. A satisfying job can give us a sense of happiness. A loving relationship. Money in the bank might give us a sense of happiness. A pleasant vacation or good health might give us a sense of happiness. But, joy is different, he says. Joy is something that is as unpredictable, he says, as the one who bestows it.

There is a difference between happiness and joy. Happiness we can try to achieve. Joy, we can only receive.

It is the same difference as between contentment and peace achievement and fulfillment affection and love optimism and hopea cure and getting healedor making a commitment and getting saved.

One we can try to do; but the other we can only receive.

Advent is a journey to joy, but it is not us who are traveling. It is joy that is coming to us.

This is the beauty of the poetry of the 40th Chapter of Isaiah. You know, there is really more than one Isaiah. The book that we have now as the one book of Isaiah in our Bible was really written by two or three different prophets. Isaiah, chapter 1 through chapter 39, is written by the first prophet Isaiah. The first section of the book of Isaiah is called "the book of justice and righteousness and judgment."

Chapter 40 of Isaiah begins the second book of Isaiah, which was written by a second prophet named Isaiah. This is the book that is called "the book of comfort, consolation, blessing and joy." It begins with the words,

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people."

The image that the second prophet Isaiah uses to describe the journey to joy is the image of a highway.

We can't manufacture joy, we can't produce it, we can't control it, but he says we can build a way for it. We can make a way for joy to come to us.

During the prophet Isaiah's time, it was the custom that if you wanted to invite the king to visit your community or your village, before you extended an invitation to the king to come, you would send out a crew to build a highway, so that it would be easy to get the king there. You wouldn't impolitely ask the king to come without preparing a smooth and an even way for the king to get there. The second prophet Isaiah uses this image to describe our spiritual lives. For joy to come to us, we should prepare a way in our hearts and in our souls.

If we can't produce joy, if we can't make it happen -- and we can't -- Isaiah says make a way then for joy to come to you.

There are three things in his poem that the second prophet Isaiah says that we can do to make a way for joy to come to us.

Three things that we can do and I think I understand two of them.

The first thing that the prophet Isaiah says about the way that joy will come to us is that it will come on a highway in the desert. I think I understand this. I think I understand that joy comes to us at the places where we have, desert-like, emptied our lives in the arid empty places of our lives where we have removed the clutter that we like to fill our lives up with. Joy comes to us on a highway through the empty places of our lives.

I pretty well keep my life full of clutter. There are times -- and this upsets Jane -- when I will watch CNN and listen to NPR at the same time. From morning to noon to night I run from one thing to another. I keep my life full and noisy, and I understand that if I want joy to find its way to me I've got to empty some of the clutter from my life.

Joy comes to us along a highway in the desert in the places in our lives that we have emptied.

Annie Belle Daisey and Sally Mathews led an Advent Day here yesterday from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. When I saw that it was scheduled I asked Nancy Webb, who coordinates our education programs, what's going to happen. She said, "Well, it will be mostly silence," So I didn't go.

I did attend our Taize service on Friday night. That's mostly silence too, some soothing repetitive singing and some praying out loud, but it's mostly silence. But it's over in an hour. I can stand silence for an hour.

It is hard to empty our lives of all of the stuff and all the activity that we fill it with, but unless we empty our lives and make space for it, there is no way for joy to find its way to us, and I understand that.

The second thing that the Second Prophet Isaiah says about joy making its way to us -- about us making a way for joy to get to us -- is that joy is a revelation of the glory of God. Joy isn't really happiness, or a sense of satisfaction about our own work, or our own doings and accomplishments, or our own successes. It's not about our own glory but it's about opening a way so that the glory of God can get to us. Opening a way through our own glory so that God's glory can reveal itself.

Making a way for joy means giving up our attachment to our own successes so that we can receive the

revelation of the glory of God coming to us.

God really is joy from top to bottom. So, what we need to do, the second prophet Isaiah says, is to open space in the midst of our own self-glorification so that God's glory -- God's joy -- can get through to us. Joy really isn't about me. Joy is about God coming into me.

So, I think I understand what the second prophet Second Isaiah means when he says that making a way for joy to get to us means building a highway and opening space through the clutter of my life and through my own self-glorification.

What I don't understand -- so well -- is when the second prophet Isaiah talks about the way being smooth and the mountains being leveled and the valleys being lifted up.

"Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places as a plain." (Isaiah 40: 4)

What does that mean?

What does this "mountain and valley" business mean?

Sitting with this scripture this week, this is what I've come to. This is what I suspect that the second prophet Isaiah was trying to say: That in addition to giving up my attachment to the stuff in my life, and in addition to giving up my attachment to my own glory, I may need to give up my attachment to even the obstacles in my life.

I may even need to give up my attachment to the mountains that I need to climb and the valleys that I need to survive and the rough places that I pass through.

I hate the disadvantages of my life. I hate them and I love them at the same time. I am a grown man -- almost an old man -- and I still hate the disadvantages of my life.

I hate that my parents grew up in the shadow of the fear of poverty. I hate that they had to quit school before they got much of a formal education. I hate that English wasn't their first language.

When I got to college, I had an accent so thick that I was a joke. I hated Speech 101, and I hated Professor Piznofsky who used my accent as a bad example of the way no one should talk.

Thirty years later, I still hate and yet I love the disadvantages of my life. Thirty years later, when I wake up in the morning, the first thing that I think about is the mountains that I need to climb. When I go to bed I think about the valleys that I need to survive. In the middle of the day, I think about the rough places that I need to make it through.

Thirty years later, I am still attached to the disadvantages of my life. The disadvantages and disabilities and distresses of my life are nailed to me the way Jesus was nailed to the cross. Thirty years after they are history!

I suspect that the third thing that the second prophet Isaiah may be saying is that to make a way for joy to come to me, I need to let go of even the mountains and the valleys and the rough places in my life.

I called Claude Edmonds this week. Dr. Claude Edmonds was twice the senior pastor of historic Tindley Temple United Methodist Church in Philadelphia. He was the only pastor I knew in the Philadelphia area who was twice named a district superintendent. Years ago, I used to go to hear Dr. Edmonds preach from

time to time, but I hadn't spoken to him in ten years. This week, I gave him a call.

Dr. Edmonds, I understand, has had some strokes and he is blind and uses a walker to get around.

I didn't know if I'd be able to get through to him or if he'd be able to talk to me. I thought maybe his wife would answer the phone. But when the phone rang and someone picked it up, it was Dr. Edmonds himself.

His voice was weaker, but it was the same voice I'd heard preach so often years ago. I said to him, "Dr. Edmonds, it's Dean Snyder."

"Dean Snyder," he answered, "Dean Snyder. How are you?"

I said, "I'm doing fine, You know, I'm down in Washington, D.C., now."

"I heard that," Dr. Edmonds said.

Then asked how he was doing and, after we talked about his health for a while, I said, "Dr. Edmonds, there was a story I heard you tell in a sermon ten or fifteen years ago. I can't quite remember it, but I've never quite forgotten it either, and I wonder if you remember the story about the elderly woman who lived at the foot of the mountain."

Dr. Edmonds said he remembered the story but he needed a minute to think to recall it. Then, after a minute of silence, he told me the story that I remembered, but did not quite remember, from a sermon of his I heard ten or fifteen years ago. Dr. Edmond's story goes like this:

There was a woman who lived at the foot of a tall mountain. Her church was located on the other side of the mountain. On Sunday mornings, she would have to drive her old car over the mountain. She was sometimes afraid her old car wouldn't make it. Then she'd have to drive it back over the mountain to get home. On Wednesday nights she had to drive her old car over the mountain again for prayer meeting and then drive back. Every Sunday and every Wednesday she was afraid her old car would not make it every week.

One Sunday her pastor preached a sermon on a saying of Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus said that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, and you tell a mountain to be moved, it will move.

After the sermon, she said to her pastor, "I have faith the size of a mustard seed and I'm telling this mountain to be moved."

It became her theme. Every Sunday and every Wednesday evening she said, "Pastor, I have faith the size of a mustard seed, and I'm telling this mountain to be moved."

Her pastor eventually became distressed about this fixation she had on moving the mountain. He became concerned that, when the mountain didn't move, she might lose her faith. He tried to explain to her that when Jesus only speaking metaphorically. He didn't mean that an actual mountain would physically move.

But the woman said, "No, pastor, I have faith the size of a mustard seed and I believe this mountain will move."

One day the pastor went to visit the elderly woman. When he got to her side of the mountain, he saw some men with surveying equipment at the foot of the mountain. He stopped and asked the men what they were doing.

"We're from the state department of transportation," a man said. "A new highway is scheduled to be built

across this way. We're here to move this mountain."

When I first heard Claude tell that story, I remembered it because there was a mountain in my life that I didn't know how I would climb. But, when I heard him tell the story again this week, it occurred to me that I had missed the point of his story, really. Maybe I had missed the point of Jesus' saying as well. I really don't need to climb every mountain. I may not need to survive every valley or endure every rough place. Maybe there are mountains that I can just let go of, and let them be leveled. Maybe there are valleys I can let be filled and rough places, thirty years later, that I can let become smooth.

So, if joy is going to get to us, we need to make a way. Let go of the clutter. Let go of the glory. Let go even of the disadvantages and disabilities and distresses that we so much love to hate.