

Not-so-simple Joy
Zephaniah 3:14-20 Luke 3:7-18

“Joy to the world.” That has a ring to it, doesn’t it?

Would it be the same if it were: “Bliss to the world”? Or, how about, “Delight to the world”? Maybe, “Enjoyment to the world”? Or even, “Happiness to the world”? Those aren’t quite the same, are they?

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come”. What a powerful proclamation...and what a challenge for us because, I suspect for most of us, we think we would much rather have happiness than joy.

That is because happiness is defined as an emotion in which we "experience feelings ranging from contentment and satisfaction to bliss and intense pleasure," whereas joy "is a stronger, less common feeling than happiness." Happiness is in the here and now; it’s on the surface and is immediate, whereas joy sometimes is buried deep, underlying everything else that happens, every other experience.

We often experience joy when we achieve selflessness to the point of personal sacrifice. That seems like a long way from happiness! However, we encounter joy when we are spiritually connected to God or people.

Now that is an important distinction, especially for us on this Third Advent Sunday. It is critical for us to understand this coming Christ event in the context of Joy. And, in the process, I suspect we’ll discover that it really isn’t such a simple thing, joy.

First, what do we really know about Joy? Paul tells us that if we walk in the ways of God then we will experience joy and other feelings as well: love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Paul is not implying that happiness is all bad. We may feel happy as a result of any number of things that are not wrong morally. But the larger point is that happiness, as a feeling, is not predicated on something necessarily being good for us. It is quick to arrive and equally quick to depart. For some of us, it doesn’t take much to make us happy...and even less to take the happiness away.

Joy, on the other hand, is grounded in the idea that something is good for someone else. We have joy when -- even in our suffering -- we are acting toward someone else's well-being. If you have ever selflessly given of yourself or that which you own, you are certainly familiar with this feeling.

Or, even as simple an example of gift-giving. Remember when you were a child and how excited you would be about receiving a gift? That was happiness. But then, at some point, you found yourself more excited about watching someone else open a gift from you. That is closer to joy.

This idea of self-giving also explains verses in the Bible that might initially seem difficult to understand without this distinction between joy and happiness. For instance, Hebrews 12:2 makes a lot more sense in this context. It reads: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross."

All this might cause us to consider what motivates us in life. If all of our efforts are focused on trying to be happy -- I think that we may be missing the point. Happiness is not bad, please don't misunderstand! But happiness is frequently about self and about the moment.

But if our purpose is to have joy in our lives then we have committed to one another in a way that seeks something better than simple self-satisfaction.

Happiness is external. It's based on situations, events, people, places, things, and thoughts. Happiness is connected to your hope for a relationship or your hope for a future.

Happiness is future oriented, and it puts all its eggs in someone else's basket. It is dependent on outside situations, people, or events to align with your expectations so that the end result is your happiness. These expectations can be seen especially during the holidays when whether or not you have a 'merry Christmas' or a 'happy holiday' depends on whether or not the job is right, the presents are right, the dinner is right, the right person is with you, shows up, isn't drunk, isn't cheating, or a list of other behaviors you expect for a 'happy holiday' experience.

Unfortunately, life rarely obliges in that way. When things fall apart...then your holidays were not 'happy' and your happiness was crushed.

This time of year is one of the hardest times for so many people: People who are lost, who are lonely, who are displaced, who have no place, who long for something just out of reach. This season is a time when far-too-many people build their future happiness on hopes, dreams and TV movie specials.

And then when the New Year comes, things are no better and the world crashes in. It's not surprising that there are more drug overdoses, more suicides, more self-harm events just after the New Year than any other time of the year. Happiness was not there. Happiness failed.

But happiness is not joy because joy is not external, it can't be bought and it is not conditional on someone else's behavior. In fact, joy is not contingent on anything in order to exist. You can lose in court, lose your life savings, watch your friends leave, have all the bad luck in the world, or live out of the back of your car and still have joy.

You're probably thinking, 'Sure you can have joy in those circumstances if you are Mother Teresa!'

Joy is almost a mystery, isn't it? It's a spiritual quality that is internal. That is a key understanding for us today as we begin to understand "joy". Instead of looking externally for those things that bring us short-term happiness, we desperately need to learn to cultivate internal and deep abiding joy.

Somewhere along that rocky path of life and relationships, we must begin to learn what is happiness and what is joy.

The transitory things of life are happiness-based. Those are the things that can be as easily lost as gained. A big house, a career, diamonds and money. They come and they go. They may bring happiness...for a moment.

However, when stuff, people, and the problems they bring fall away there is a stillness. Only in that stillness can we ever find the joy that resides inside of us, dependent on nothing external in order to exist. During this Advent season, this is a tremendous concept to contemplate.

It was in the midst of stillness that the angels proclaimed, "Joy to the world"! It was in the midst of stillness that, for one, incredible moment, the world could hear the music of the spheres. At that one point in time, we were invited to find Joy.

It is in the midst of stillness, and ONLY then, that we can begin to listen for the Joy in our own lives.

Joy comes when you make peace with **who** you are, **where** you are, **why** you are. When you need nothing more than your truth and the love of a good and generous God to bring balance and peace, then you have settled into the abiding joy that is not rocked by anything.

THAT is the Joy that came into the world on that night so very long ago. THAT was the joy we were given and THAT was the joy we are still offered. THAT was the JOY given to the world.

However, as you have some to suspect, it is a not-so-simple Joy. And it has little to do with happiness. You CAN have both, but frequently you must choose between them.

So, you get to choose: Happiness or Joy? Contrary to what you often hear, I suspect money CAN buy you happiness; on a temporary, fleeting basis. But if our purpose is to have joy in our lives then we have committed to God and to one another in a way that seeks something better than simple self-satisfaction or temporary pleasure.

Let me ask a question for your consideration: What are you doing in the world that is causing joy? Sharing joy with others? Allowing you to experience your own joy?

If you can't answer that question currently, be assured that there is still good news. You don't need to be stuck in depression or despair, for you see, God has already provided the answer.

Put yourself out there and do something good for someone else -- and feel what happens. Make your actions and your focus outside your own skin.

This week of advent is about joy, the God-given joy that was provided so many years ago. The joy that we all-too-often overlook or ignore in our desperate search for happiness. This is joy. The joy given to the world, because the Lord indeed IS come.

And this stuff, this overwhelming, life changing, world shattering stuff is Joy.

Once you feel it, you will know a whole different set of feelings and experiences as well: Those the Gospel writers wrote of: hope, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

THAT is the joy to this world! THAT is God's most precious gift, come to us in the form of a child, born in a manger.

And it is in those feelings, that experience, that you will come to know Joy...and God.