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3 Advent, Year B
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Don't Worry, be Joyful

Some years ago, my wife and I played a terrible practical joke on a few of our closest family members. Having grown weary of the ubiquitous Christmas card end-of-year “look at what we did and where we went this year” letter insert, we decided to write our own version. We wrote a normal one – listing what we’d done and the places we’d gone -- and mailed it out to the larger list. We also wrote a different one and mailed it to a few relatives and close friends to see what they might think.

In this letter, we did not speak of our children’s achievements, our professional successes or our global adventures. We went dark. We wrote of tantrums, expulsions, illness, humiliations and failures. Some of it was partially true – most of it made it – and we were so convincing in our sad, snarky Christmas letter that a relative reached out to us to see if we were O.K. And then we told them of our scheme.

Deep down, I think what we were trying to do was to push back up against the pressure to have life rolled up in nicely presented package by the end of each year for the world to see. A life that from the outside projected happiness, when we all probably know that that is not always the case. When others want a smile and happiness, there can be a lot stirring inside and around us.

It was musician Bobby McFerrin who wrote and performed his a cappella hit “Don’t worry be Happy” in 1988.

Here's a little song I wrote
You might want to sing it note for note
Don't worry, be happy
In every life we have some trouble
But when you worry you make it double

Ain't got no place to lay your head
Somebody came and took your bed
The landlord say your rent is late
He may have to litigate
Don't worry, be happy

Today, the third Sunday in Advent and its dominant theme, is the church’s version of that song. Sort of. Well, not really. It’s more than that. Long ago when Advent used to be longer and more penitent, the leaders figured that people in the midst of fasting and waiting needed a boost. So, the message for this Sunday – very close to Christmas – was to rejoice. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. There’s a difference, as it turns out, between happiness by joy.

The late theologian Henri Nouwen described that difference. While happiness is dependent on external conditions, joy is "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that

nothing -- sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death -- can take that love away."

External conditions can change day to day thus shifting our wiliness and response of happiness. Joy goes deeper.

What Scripture shows us is that it is possible to experience joy in the midst of profoundly sad moments and hard times, because God enters our lives and often comes to us when we are most ready to accept what before we might have thought we could have done on our own. There is no accident that transformation and change does not happen so much when we are flying high and most confident about who we are and where we are going, but when we miss, get shaken, confused, begin to doubt or are struck by adversity that we did not see coming. Then God enters in.

The public ministry of Jesus began with him quoting the message of profound joy that Isaiah speaks of. Good news to the oppressed, the brokenhearted are patched up, liberty is proclaimed to the captives, and release to the prisoners. Mourners are comforted. Sorrow becomes joy.

When people come to me in moments of crisis and uncertainty, and ask where they should begin to read in the Bible – they know they have a version laying around the house somewhere – I encourage the Psalms.

The reason we read the Psalms because they allow us to hear how people have prayed for centuries through the ups and downs of life – abandonment, defeat, exile, and hardship. They allow us rage against God when we feel alone or wronged. They listen when we feel as if the whole world is against us. They accompany us through the valleys of the shadow of death and remind us that our help is to come from the Lord. They invite us to see that the sun will rise again and new day will lead to new possibilities.

They show a pathway not to happiness – an emotion dependent on the external – but something more that comes from above. And in that moment, in Psalm 126 we hear and echo: The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Those who go out weeping shall come home with shouts of joy.

The third Sunday of Advent wants us to hear loud and clear: Paul writes in the Epistle: v. 16-21 Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; hold fast to what is good.

My wife Leslie and I have traveled to Mexico with our family many times. When our kids where very young, we flew into Mexico City to transfer to a language school in Cuernavaca, some two hours south by car. Those where clergy vacations in those days: the whole family in language class. On this trip, we flew into Mexico City at night and saw lights that would spread from horizon to the next. Some 18 million people living the vast city, one that we know is susceptible to earthquakes and violence. I remember after we collected our luggage, we had to walk through crowds and crowds of people to find the car that would take us the rest of way. With kids too big to carry, and too young to allow to wander on their own, we grabbed their hands and held on tight as we walked pulling our suitcases.

Hold fast to those we love. Hold fast to what is good. Hold fast to the gift of community in a land that values independence more than dependence.

The Pew Research Center did a survey of most and least religious states last year and ranked them. Most religious: Alabama. There was a tie for 50th – the least religious states. Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Hold onto community when it seems like coming to church is swimming upstream.

Hold fast to the joy that music brings – especially this time of year. Hold fast to those moments that seem to be going by too quickly by taking time to sit, pause, look up and around. Hold fast and hold on to what matters and let the rest go.

Going back to Nouwen's words – learning the difference between happiness and joy -- is becomes "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved."

Why is unconditional love so true and so hard?

Diplomats often speak of conditions that have to be met before opposing sides can sit down at a negotiation table with one another.

It took the prodigal son distance and time away from his father – time misspent doing all the wrong things – that in returning he discovered that he was loved even after he wandered, rebelled, and squandered away almost everything.

The first step of faith – in being able to experience joy – is talking ourselves into being worthy of love and forgiveness by God because of who we are and in spite of what we've done.

Loving unconditionally involves doing the inner work that many of find difficult and illusive. It is a life-long process of coming to see ourselves as God does.

This is the heart of what Advent waits to announce. The incarnation of God in Jesus, whose birth and life John was preaching and preparing for, had no pre-conditions. God came into a broken world with no guarantees.

Jesus was born in an out of way, almost forgotten town – far away from the halls of power. Lowly shepherds are a lasting testimony for the working-class roots of the first Nativity scene.

In the days that remain until Christmas, spend a few moments each day, thinking and praying about what fades away as soon as the special day and season is over – the decorations and lights put away for next year – and what stays with us through all our days. Hold onto to One who holds onto you. Always.