SURPRISED BY JOY

Philippians 4:4-7

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Joy – what a thing to behold – what a thing to experience – what a thing to articulate in words that are never enough to describe. However, articulate I shall attempt today in this little talk for today – this sermon. I want to begin with some words of children, from whose innocent mouths words of joy often erupt. For example, I think of a few of those classic “Children’s Letters to God,” which you may have read in the book by the same name. Here are a few:

Dear God: Are you invisible or is that just a trick? Lucy.

Dear God: Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce.

Dear God: Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother. Larry.

Dear God: Are you real? Some people don’t believe it. If you are, you’d better do something quick. Love, Harriet Anne.

I really like that last one. It especially connects with this season of Advent, because God is, indeed, in the process of “doing something quick” as we celebrate once again the anticipation of the coming of Jesus into this world – the incarnation of the joy that is God as a human being like us. Awakening to what God is doing can bring great joy into one’s life – even if one’s life might be anything but joyous. For the kingdom of God is with and within us all – and mindfulness of the joy of that kingdom within can stimulate a joy in our souls that is beyond words – no matter what our outer circumstances might be.

So today, on this third Sunday of Advent, I invite you to awaken to joy – I also invite you to be “surprised by joy” – for sometimes it certainly can be a surprise.

Take our passage for today from Philippians, for example. One would think that joy would be the last thing on the mind of Paul, who is in prison and awaiting trial at the time of his writing this letter. But the letter oozes with joy, as Paul encourages the church to be persistent in maintaining their faith, even in the face of opposition, even threats of death. Paul encourages joy, for, as he says earlier in the letter, “it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.” That is, joy emanates from the real presence of God, a presence always more powerful than any obstacle in life, including suffering, opposition, and threats of death.

So, I can imagine the folks who first hear these words in our passage today being quite surprised by joy – that is, surprised to hear Paul encouraging joy – perhaps surprised at experiencing joy themselves, a joy for which they have no words of description – only the words of Paul: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice,” writes Paul. “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” Joy – enmeshed in the presence and peace of God – is beyond understanding – often quite a surprise!

The prophet Zephaniah also expresses a joy like this. In the case of our Old Testament passage, the joy is the result of God’s promise of restoration to Jerusalem for the ancient people of Israel. For God is “with them,” as the Old Testament claims over and over again – and no amount of suffering, opposition, or threats of death will be able to remove God’s restorative presence from their midst – again, I would imagine the joy that Zephaniah expresses being quite a surprise to the ancient people of Israel.

So, “surprised by joy.” I derive the title of this sermon today from a marvelous book by that name, written by C.S. Lewis, that great 20th century Christian apologist, and the person probably most responsible, through his writings, for convincing me to go into Christian ministry. “Surprised by Joy” is a partial autobiography that Lewis wrote in 1955. It covers his life from early childhood to his conversion to Christianity in 1931. The complete title of the book is “Surprised by Joy – The Shape of My Early Life.”

And Lewis takes the title of his book from a poem by William Wordsworth, “Surprised by Joy – Impatient as the Wind.” In this poem, this sonnet, Wordsworth expresses his struggle to cope with the death of his young daughter. And he is quite surprised that he experiences an unexplainable joy as he expresses his sorrow. Wordsworth, in other words, is “surprised by joy” even though he is grief-stricken.

In his book, C.S. Lewis deals with his struggles in his gradual conversion from atheism – then to theism – and finally to Christianity. The “joy” about which Lewis writes is quite unlike what most of us probably think of when we think of joy as an expression of happiness. “Joy” is the word that Lewis uses to translate a German word – “Sehnsucht” – which means something like “longing.” So the joy about which Lewis writes is more like a “longing” for something, rather than happiness about something. This joy he refers to as “longing” was apparently an accidental discovery in his life. And his experience of this phenomenon was pretty much unexplainable to Lewis. So, he explained it using that German word for “longing.” He refers to his experience as a “stab” of longing, as it were. He writes: “Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general, but also even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing.” He goes on to describe joy as being like a signpost to those lost – like him – pointing the way to Christianity. And this signpost takes him by surprise.

Lewis writes further: “Once we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, its appearance is not as important.” That is, once Lewis experienced this unexplainable signpost of longing, he encountered more and more “signposts,” as it were. His initial “longing” came to fruition as a continuous joy in his life, regardless of outer circumstances. Being “surprised by joy” made all the difference in his life as he wholeheartedly embraced Christianity – and promoted it through his many writings. Coincidentally, two years after the publication of “Surprised by Joy,” Lewis married American writer, Joy Davidman – so, once again, he was surprised by “Joy,” as it were – with a quite different meaning. Later, when she died, Lewis wrote another of his very important and influential books, called “A Grief Observed.”

Well, I mentioned a moment ago that the writings of C.S. Lewis were very much responsible for convincing me to go into Christian ministry. I have talked about my call to ministry before, and I don’t want to go through all of that again, except to point out what a “surprise” it was for me to accidentally discover that phenomenon that Lewis calls “joy” – joy as an intense “longing” – not explainable in words. My accidental discovery was a copy of “Mere Christianity,” by Lewis – just sitting there on a minister’s desk as I was waiting to enter the sanctuary in order to play my trumpet for a wedding processional. I read the first few words in the book, and I was hooked. I then read all of his books – and I began the long process of becoming a Presbyterian minister. I was “surprised by joy.”

Well, this “surprise” is for all of us, in my estimation. For I believe that God as Holy Spirit living in us awakens us to faith in this way – as a “longing” for something we cannot explain. When we awaken to this longing, it is not the result of a rational decision by us to have faith. Rather, there is just something that seems to pull us toward a relationship with God that is beyond understanding. I believe that something is that stab of longing, as C.S. Lewis puts it. That something is the Spirit of God working within each one of us. What we “decide” to do – if we choose to do so – is “respond” to that longing. We “decide to follow Jesus,” as it were, because we have been “surprised” by joy – “surprised” by longing – “surprised” by the real presence of God, the real presence of the living Christ, the real presence of the Holy Spirit pointing the way – just as it did for C.S. Lewis – just as it did for me upon first encountering the writings of C.S. Lewis.

So today, I invite you all to awaken to joy – I invite you to be “surprised by joy” – for sometimes it certainly can be a surprise. It can be a joy beyond words – a joy that is longing – longing for God’s presence and peace. For the kingdom of God is with and within us all – the kingdom of God is joy. Surprise!

Let us pray: God of Joy: Awaken our souls to your presence and your peace, here and now, as we await our annual celebrations of the coming of your Son into our lives, causing us to rejoice. In the joy of Christ. AMEN.