

Making the Blessings of Joy Known

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, December 15, 2019)

The Divine Joy within me greets the Divine Joy within you.

In her book entitled *Laugh your Way to Grace*, Rev. Susan Sparks writes about the saving grace of laughter. In the following quote, I have replaced the word laughter with the word joy.

The adapted quote reads, "Joy is like a good dose of helium that sets the heart soaring upward. It can free us a little from our worries, lighten our mood, and float for a bit above our concerns for the world. Up high, the world looks less scary. Up high, we gain a sense of appreciation. Up high, we can see our way through many of our problems and situations."

Throughout this Advent series, we have embraced the flow of joy. The joy that arises when we make peace with who we are, with life's circumstances, with our relationships with others and with the world. I encourage all of us to keep taking "joy breaths" throughout this busy season.

Last week I talked about how challenging it can be to hear the repeating sounds of love in a world affected by pain, suffering, loss, and violence. Similarly, these same realities and personal struggles can hinder us from making the blessings of joy known in our lives. The inspiration behind this Joy series is the understanding that life can be hard, but it does not have to harden us, and that deep joy exists within us no matter what life situations we face.

Is it possible to be joyful amid the shadows of sorrow? Henri Nouwen put it this way: while happiness usually depends on circumstances, joy runs deeper. "Joy," he writes, "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."

I wonder if this was the message that the first Christians received upon hearing the birth stories of the Christ child. Mary and Joseph, people who were unassuming and unimportant where chosen by God. Shepherds, who most likely were despised and shunned were chosen by God. Mary and Joseph find themselves in a desperate situation, yet God does not abandon them.

From these stories the first Christians learned that God's love was unconditional and available to all people, wealthy, poor, young,

old, Jew, and Gentile and that God's love existed within the darkness of despair, oppression, sickness, hatred, violence, and fear. One could imagine this message affecting them at a very deep level, awakening the emotions of hope and joy within them.

In the following reading, we hear, as the early Jewish Christians heard, that joy does not wait for the struggle to be over. In this iconic passage, Mary "rejoices" during her pregnancy. Imagine singing with joy amid a situation that could end in her death or in being dishonored by her people. Instead of disappearing into fear and anxiety, in faith Mary sings out powerfully a joyful message that a savior would come as a Presence of justice for the oppressed and freedom for the captive.

*"And Mary said,
I'm bursting with God-news;
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
[God's] mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before him.
[God] bared [an] arm and showed... strength

scattered the bluffing braggarts.
[God] knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.
[God] embraced the chosen child, Israel;
[God] remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what [God] promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now."*

It is this same deep joy that Mary expresses that enables us to persevere and face the struggles of life. What we all know only too well is that life, ours and others, will always be affected in some way by suffering, pain, and conflict.

In his book *The Pursuit of Joy*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that what enabled the Jews to survive in the past and what allows

them to persevere as a 'people' today is their capacity for joy.

"Jewish and Christian history is replete with horrendous suffering, "yet people never lost the capacity to rejoice, to celebrate in the heart of darkness, and to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. When we focus on the moment, allowing ourselves to dance, sing, and give thanks... and embrace the oneness of all life, then there is joy."

The *Book of Joy* is a conversation between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu, two people who cultivated joy in their long lives. A profound joy exudes from their presence despite all that they have suffered and endured. The Archbishop explains, "We are meant to live in joy. This does not mean that life will be easy or painless. It means that we can turn our faces to the wind and accept that this is the storm we must pass through. We cannot succeed by denying what exists."

Suffering does not cancel out joy, they co-exist. As we have heard, joy can even be present in the midst of sorrowful or painful circumstances. The birth stories, along with the teachings of many spiritual leaders, help us to understand that we can survive hardship, loss, and failure if we never lose our capacity for joy. It is the capacity for joy that provides the strength needed to endure and is always with us no matter how miserable we may feel or the state of the world. But it is up to of us to connect with that inner joy.

In his book entitled *Joy* spiritual teacher Osho writes, "Joy arises within, it has nothing to do with the outside, others do not cause it, it is not caused at all. It is a spontaneous flow of your own energy." In her song, Mary proclaimed that spontaneous flow of joy amid dire circumstances. "Joy is, just like your breathing, your heartbeat, and the blood circulating in your body." Joy exists, always and in all circumstances.

When we connect with that joy within and let it be known in our daily thoughts, words, and actions, then, as Osho says, we become "a source of great transformation for many people. When you 'live into joy,' you can reach out to the afflicted and teach them to dance. When you are joy-filled, your mind can find God in all things. So, live into joy, reach deep down, find it, and release it." Make the blessings of joy known each day of your life. Be strong, do not fear – and rejoice!