

UNUSUAL JOY
Psalm 126

Dr. J. Howard Olds
December 15, 2002

In a Dr. Seuss Christmas story, the small-hearted Grinch steals food and toys from all the Who's of Whosville in an effort to curb their Christmas joy. Yet on Christmas morn, the tall and the small sang without any presents at all.

And the Grinch with his grinch-feet, ice cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so?
It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
It came without packages, boxes or bags!
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before.
Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas, perhaps, is a whole lot more.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Joy is much more than pleasure or fun. Joy is divinity dancing to a new drum. Joy is gratefulness for the greatest of gifts. Joy is sorrow that we know turns to bliss. Joy is the glory of God now on earth. Joy is the Amen of a spiritual new birth. Let the psalmist help us explain it. Let the Church gladly proclaim it. Let the Amen sound from God's people again. Let God's people say, "Amen." The word for Joy in worship is *Amen*.

JOY COMES TO THOSE WHO DREAM. *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. When our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy (verses 1-2a).* When our minds are full of dreams let God's people say, "Amen."

In the classic movie, *Miracle on 34th Street*, Santa Claus is put on trial in New York City for spreading cheer and good will among people. His principles of consideration and cooperation seem threatening in a world of competition. As the charges are leveled and the trial begins, the defense lawyer is challenged by his girlfriend. "Why risk your job, your reputation, your standing in society in a silly pursuit to prove the existence of Santa Claus?" The determined attorney replies, "Because it's more than Santa Claus on trial. It's love, hope, peace, fairness, and goodwill on the witness stand. I intend to defend these principles in the courtroom of humankind."

May I ask you today, "What are your dreams for this Christmas?" No, I'm not talking about the weather. Whether or not it snows for the holidays is a matter of personal preference. There are other matters of profound importance. Are you still dreaming of a just Christmas, a peaceful Christmas, a loving Christmas, a forgiving Christmas?

An article in USA Today this week says “the happiest people surround themselves with family and friends. They don’t care about keeping up with the Joneses next door. They lose themselves in daily activities and most importantly, they forgive easily.”

I know it is not always easy to dream, is it? It probably never has been. Annie Johnson Flint wrote a poem a few years ago that goes like this:

I’ve dreamed many dreams that never came true,
I’ve seen them vanish at dawn.
But I’ve realized enough of my dreams, thank God,
To make me want to dream on.
I’ve prayed many prayers when no answer came,
When my hopes and faith were almost gone.
But answers have come to enough of my prayers,
To make me keep praying on.
I’ve drained the cup of disappointment and pain,
I’ve gone many days without a song.
But I’ve sipped enough nectar from the roses of life,
To make me want to dream on.

Joy comes to those who dream.

JOY COMES TO THOSE WHO ARE GRATEFUL.

*Then they said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”
The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O
Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb! (verses 2b-4).* When the Lord has
done great things, let God’s people say, “AMEN.”

A young stranger to the Alps was making his first climb, accompanied by two guides. It was a steep, hazardous ascent, but the novice felt secure with one guide leading and the other following. For hours they etched their way up the mountain until at last they reached the summit. Wanting the novice to have the first glorious view the lead guide stepped aside. The kid, intoxicated with his own success and oblivious to the strong winds that blow across summit rocks, jumped to his feet. That is when the other guide grabbed him shouting, “On your knees, sir, on your knees. You’re never safe at the top except on your knees.” The most joyful thing most of us could do today is to bow in humble adoration.

Life is not about you. It is not about your personal fulfillment, your personal peace of mind, your status in creation, or even your happiness. The chief end of human existence is to know God and enjoy him forever. The real joy of worship is not what you get out of it but what you put into it. Let the Amen sound from God’s people again.

Every Tuesday night, a loyal group of volunteers from this church provide food and shelter for 12 homeless men in our ministry called Room in the Inn. Two

weeks ago we had a guest whom I'll call Jim. Jim had taken a vow of silence so he uttered ne'er a mumblin' word in his overnight stay at our place. His friends said his mouth had gotten Jim in a lot of trouble, so he vowed to keep quiet. As Jim was leaving on Wednesday morning, warm, washed and well fed, he handed two dollars to one of our volunteers and wrote in a note that he wanted it given to the church in appreciation for our hospitality. Down and out, Jim still knew the joy of gratitude. Do you? Joy comes to those who are grateful.

JOY COMES TO THOSE WHO GRIEVE. *May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! Those who go forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves (verses 5-6).* When the moments make you cry, let God's people say, "Amen."

"Can we just skip Christmas this year?" That's the question 15-year-old Marsha asked in a flood of tears on Christmas Eve. You see, her parents divorced that year. Her Dad had a new life. Her sisters had jobs. Her brother was not coming home from college. Her mother sat and stared into the wall a lot. Christmas was coming and Marsha wanted no part of it.

The thing that separates Christian joy from cultural happiness is that joy acknowledges the pain. Happiness is circumstantial. Joy is everlasting. A few martinis and several bloody marys may make you merry. But joy does more than drown our tears. It sits with us through the night. Joy is not a pious wish that things will get better. Joy is an abiding promise that God is with us. Joy and sadness are part of the same dance and you have to learn all the movements in order to live.

Fanny Crosby, who gave the church great songs to sing, was blind for most of her life. When she was only 8 years old, she wrote this little poem.

Oh what a happy child I am, although I cannot see.
I am resolved that in this world, contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy that other people don't.
To weep and sigh because I'm blind, I cannot and I won't.

No trouble enjoys everlasting life. No sorrow lasts forever. Every pain has a life span. There is healing for every heartache. Weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning. If this tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. If you can affirm that, let the Church say, "Amen."

JOY COMES WHEN GOD'S GLORY FILLS THE SKY. When God's glory fills the sky, let the people of God say, "Amen."

The Angel said "Behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10).

Joy is more than a three letter word on the flap of a Christmas card. Joy is an encounter of a Divine kind. Joy is the arrival of a Savior. Joy is the intervention of God into human affairs. When God arrives, the joy is unspeakable and full of glory.

Paul Harvey says the world is more interested in noise than news. One gunshot makes more noise than a thousand prayers. That doesn't mean it is more important. It just sells more newspapers.

When the wonderful love of a blessed redeemer sinks down into the depths of your heart, there probably won't be a feature story about it in the morning paper. But the new birth he brings will put a spark in your step, a focus to your faith, a purpose to your being that this world has yet to dream of.

C.S. Lewis says, "I hoped to find joy in a place. Instead I found real joy to be in a person, the person of Jesus Christ." Like a child who has received the best Christmas gift ever, I still can't believe it. And sometimes I pray: Lord, you really shouldn't have done it. But even in my feeble understanding I delight in it. What makes Christmas most wonderful is that nobody could have guessed it. God came down to save the likes of you and me.

So I want to bring some joy back to the Church. Our doxology should never be a dirge. Our great thanksgiving should never be a lament.

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise God all creatures here below.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king.

Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace, hail the Son of righteousness.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in us adore him!

All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him!

Let the Amen sound from his people again; gladly forever adore him.

And God's people said, "Amen!"

