

Today is the third Sunday in Advent. So we lit the first two candles and the third, which is pink. It is pink, on purpose, to symbolize joy. We did not run out of purple ones.

Well, I have been spending a lot of time at the hospital lately, which is not a joyful place. One night I took a break, and went to a waiting room. I picked up a copy of Time magazine. It was all about the first decade of this century, and how bad it has been. We started by having a confusing Presidential election. The next year, we had the tragedy of 9-11. We had a tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina. We have had economic and political problems. Reading that did not make me feel joyful.

Still, I am hoping that some of you have some joys to share. Is there something in 2009 which was a special joy? Think about it a moment.

I know we had a church joy—Edna knitting all those caps, and making our church famous with a MissionCast.

In my life, I had my husband’s surgery go well, my son getting married, and these two little boys, who make the house much less quiet and boring.

Anyone else? Any babies born? Weddings? There was one in the Hazelrigg family.

And how about the deep joys God gives you that are, maybe a little different than those? The reassurance that yes, you are doing what God wants you to do. Or the beauty of life itself. The beauty of this world, the sun, and stars, and moon. The fresh snow. Yes, I know not everyone likes the snow, but it is pretty.

We even have someone named Joy here. Joy must be a good thing!

It is, of course it is. And it is so important, such an integral part of the Christian faith, that St. Paul emphasized it strongly in the book of Philippians.

This is what Eugene Peterson has written about the book of Philippians:

“This is Paul’s happiest letter. And the happiness is infectious. Before we’ve read a dozen lines, we begin to feel the joy ourselves—the dance of words and the exclamations of delight have a way of getting inside us.

But happiness is not a word we can understand by looking it up in the dictionary. In fact, none of the qualities of the Christian life can be learned out of a book. Something more like apprenticeship is required, being around someone who out of years of devoted discipline shows us, by his or her entire behavior, what it is. Moments of verbal instruction will certainly occur, but mostly an apprentice acquires skill by daily and intimate association with a “master,” picking up subtle but absolutely essential things, such as time and rhythm and “touch.”

When we read what Paul wrote to the Christian believers in the city of Philippi, we find ourselves in the company of just such a master. Paul doesn’t tell us that we can be happy, or how to be happy.

He simply and unmistakably *is* happy. None of his circumstances contribute to his joy. He wrote from a jail cell, his work was under attack by competitors, and after twenty years or so of hard traveling in the service of Jesus, he was tired and would have welcomed some relief.

But circumstances are incidental compared to the life of Jesus, the Messiah, that Paul experiences from the inside. For it is a life that not only happened at a certain point in history, but continues to happen, spilling out into the lives of those who receive him,

and then continues to spill out all over the place. Christ is, among much else, the revelation that God cannot be contained or hoarded. It is this “spilling out” quality of Christ’s life that accounts for the happiness of Christians, for joy is life in excess, the overflow of what cannot be contained within any one person.”

One of the sillier songs of the 80’s actually echoed and paraphrased St. Paul’s words: “Don’t worry, be happy.” I don’t know if it was the songwriter’s intention to present a spiritual message or not, but it’s easy to remember, at least.

I would also like to read to you the thoughts of F. Richard Garland, who is published, and so is better at this than I am:

“Joy is at the heart of the journey through Advent to Christmas: Joy in the knowledge of what God has done throughout the ages, joy in the realization that God is able and that God does change things for the better, joy in the assurance that God can enter into our lives no matter what our situation may be. The Apostle Paul calls to a life of rejoicing: to live a life full of rejoicing and gentleness, put aside worry in the confidence that the Lord is near, to lift our requests in prayer, with thanksgiving, to trust that the Peace of God will guard our hearts and minds.

Let us then consider the condition of joy in our lives.

Do worries sometimes seem larger than our confidence that God is near? [But we know that God is near!]

Does the busy-ness of our lives sometime interfere in our life of prayer? [But how silly, we always have time to pray.]

Does anxiety over the big things of the world ruin the little joys of life?

Advent is a time when we can clean out the inner stables of our lives so that new life can be born, our spirits can be refreshed, and our lives may be renewed in the joy of salvation.”

Salvation is a joy, it is a great joy. The thing is though, we get so used to our blessings that we take them for granted, and forget that they are blessings. It’s like electricity. Remember that bad ice storm several years back. Did any of you lose your electricity? We did. It was awful! Before that, we would go into a room and switch on a light, and that was that. No big deal. But after we got the electricity back on after that storm, we were all so happy!

Now it can be like that. We who have been Christians a long time, have gotten used to our salvation. We take it for granted.

The Christian faith is amazingly joyful—we have been saved, for all eternity. Our God loves us and cares for us so much that Jesus came to this world to be with us—to teach us—and to rescue us, from sin and death.

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, was resurrected. He knows his way out of the grave, and he’s gonna help us with that, too when the time comes.

We’ve just got a great big fat pile of joy right there!

I have already told you how very sick Dorothy is. That does not feel joyful at all. But God is present in every situation, so there is always at least a teensy bit of joy in every situation. One joy there is watching her son and daughter-in-law giving her little sips of

water, the only bit of physical comfort she has. Another is that every time I go to visit, there are people from this church there, to visit.

Still another one is Dorothy's voice. In choir, I sit between Dorothy and the other wonderful soprano, Margaret. They keep me in tune, thank goodness. When I have thanked Dorothy for this, she would say that she used to *really* have a wonderful voice, when she was younger. Well, I think in heaven, she will get that voice back. She will be singing in the choir there, maybe even directing.

We can also think of the little joys that do so much for our hearts and souls. The little joys that either make our day, or make our day possible.

Like smiles. Go ahead, right now, give someone a nice smile—a real one that says we are both God's children. That is something to smile about, being God's child.

What other little joys? Well, we all received the joy of coming into a warm building after being out in the cold. It may not be that warm, but it's better than outside.

There is also music—we have had that joy today.

Joy is ours for the asking. And yes, I know, and St. Paul knew, there are problems and sorrows and grief in this world. There always have been.

Still we can move past them, recover from them, and find joy once again.

It's a gift from God—and we can find it right here—with this little baby, Jesus, and all he has brought and continues to bring.

May we celebrate his birthday this year in holiness and joy.

Amen.

By Reverend Sally J. DeMasters