



“Make a *Joyful* Noise?”
Scripture – Psalm 98:4-9, John 15:9-11
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 13, 2020

Veering away from this week’s lectionary readings, I chose these two brief passages from the Book of Psalms and the Gospel of John. They immediately tip my hand for the focus of today’s sermon, don’t they? “Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.” And Jesus says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

My choice of these two passages may have some of you thinking, “Is his mind so high in the clouds that he has lost touch with planet earth? Is he clueless to the multiple catastrophes assaulting us in September 2020?”

Rest assured, my feet are squarely planted on terra firma. Like you, I am tuned in to the depressing news. I lament the fact that we are in the midst of a global pandemic that has taken the lives of more than 190,000 Americans and nearly one million people worldwide. Our children have just begun a school year that is plastered with question marks. Schools are in-person; wait, now they’re not. Classes will be online. Wait, let’s have them go to school two days, then stay at home two days. Wait, let’s try something else. Maybe the children whose last names begin with the letters A through M should go on the odd days, and... Working parents are juggling their schedules like never before and worry that this will be a wasted school year.

People are marching in the streets declaring that black lives matter as much as any other lives. People are arguing over whether we should *defund* the police or further *militarize* the police.

Whipped up fear has propelled gun and ammunition sales to shoot through the roof. Our nation is deeply divided politically and a critical election is looming. The temperatures on the planet keep rising and the hot, arid climate in the West has fanned wildfires that have burned more than three million acres. Entire communities in California, Oregon and Washington have been scorched. The economy is teetering as businesses crash and more than 30 million people file for unemployment benefits. The times are tumultuous, many are experiencing record sleep deficits, and never has the word “unprecedented” been on the lips of so many.

So, why drag out a psalm that summons us to “Make a joyful noise” when the world is tormented with darkness and – to point out the obvious irony – scientists caution us to refrain from singing!

For one reason, the Bible is peppered with declarations of joy. In addition to the 98th Psalm, we are encouraged to make a “joyful noise” in Psalms 66, 95 and 100. Consider Psalm 5: “Let all who take refuge in [God] rejoice; let them ever sing for joy.” Psalm 30 sounds practically giddy: “[God] You have turned my suffering into dancing...and clothed me with joy!” More than 50 of the 150 psalms include the word joy, joyful or rejoice. You will also discover these words scattered throughout many of the other books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Skim the New Testament and you will discover that joy is one of the favorite words of the gospels of Luke and John, and it is a recurring theme in the letters of Paul. When he writes to the church in Rome, he says, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace.” (Romans 15:13). And when Paul speaks to the Galatians about the characteristics that God’s Spirit arouses in believers, the first virtue Paul mentions is love; the second is joy.

Many assume that joy is the result of one’s current situation; when work or retirement is satisfying, and when the children and grandchildren are making us proud. We are definitely joyful when life is relatively problem-free and the skies are sunny. However, it is clear from the scriptures, that joy is not simply tied to a favorable situation. Joy can pulse through our bodies even in the midst of trouble and sorrow.

Take our passage from the Gospel of John. Jesus says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Do you know the context in which he spoke these words?

Was it after he had performed a miracle? Was it when he swatted a temptation aside or when a record-breaking crowd came out to hear him or when he instructed the disciples to throw their net in another spot and they hauled in a spectacular catch? Hardly. Jesus spoke of *joy* at the Last Supper, shortly before he was betrayed and handed over to his enemies.

The disciples are on the verge of losing the one who has opened incredible new vistas and given them a true purpose for living. Their teacher, guide and counselor is about to be manhandled by Roman soldiers. Would it not be more appropriate to hand each disciple a box of tissues?

When we picture the setting of their final meal with all its tension and fear and despair, talk of joy seems like lunacy. However, Jesus could speak of joy because his bond with God and his bond with his disciples was so deep and true and beautiful. Jesus wanted his followers to understand that bonds of love cannot be broken, even by death.

Joy exudes from a deep place within us. It is a component of our character and a feeling of well-being regardless of what is currently happening. If we had to keep joy at bay until all is well, we would be a somber and miserable bunch, wouldn’t we?

Back in April, 31 year-old Elliot Dallen wrote, “Terminal cancer means I won’t see the other side of lockdown.” Just a few days ago, he wrote “Five months on, I’m still here, but much has changed...Over the past couple of months, my energy levels have dropped, and I have started doing less. I look drastically different. I have lost a lot of weight. A 20-minute coughing fit is now part of my morning routine.”¹

He talked about how sheltering in place alone was making him miserable, but then his sister moved in with him and he said that changed everything. For more than a year, Elliot had pinned his hopes on being part of a drug trial. He had hoped some new experimental drug might be the ticket he needed. Eventually he came to accept the inevitable. There would be no miracle drug to cure him. That forced him to reflect on what is genuinely important.

Number one is gratitude. He said, “During my worst moments – the shock of being diagnosed with cancer, the mental lows and debilitating symptoms of chemotherapy – it was difficult to picture any future moments of joy.

Even so, at those times I found comfort in remembering what I have: an amazing family, the friends I’ve made and times I’ve shared with them, the privilege of the life I’ve had.”²

“Number two,” Elliot said, “is that a life lived well, is long enough...The human body is a wonderful thing. You only appreciate this when it starts to fail you...Most people assume they will live to an old age. I have come to

see growing old as a privilege. Nobody should lament getting one year older, another grey hair or a wrinkle. Instead, [rejoice] that you have made it. And if you feel like you haven't made the most of your last year, try to use your next one better."³

Third lesson learned, "it's important to let yourself *be vulnerable and connect with others*. We live in a society that prizes independence...but having to allow myself to be vulnerable and accept help has given me the best two years of my life."⁴

We are created to connect with others and to form loving bonds. Without someone to love and someone who loves us, life is lonely and obstacles are a great deal more difficult to overcome. Because we have freedom to make decisions, we can make a mess of things. We can knowingly help to spread a deadly virus, build walls that divide and discriminate, and set our world ablaze. We can choose to withdraw from the world and surrender its direction to those whose motives lead to destruction. But our Creator has given us freedom to choose a different path, a better one.

That leads us to one other thing Elliot said: "Do something for others."⁵ We spend our early years looking inward and attempting to gratify our personal desires. Hopefully, before it is too late, we discover that giving ourselves for the common good is where we find purpose and joy.

Life is short. Whether we live to 31 or 91, the fuse that is our lives burns quickly. So, regardless of where you find yourself, do your part to defeat the darkness. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote, "People are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within."⁶

Following the path of Jesus- which is faith, hope, love & joy creates the glow.

NOTES

1. Elliot Dallen, "At 31, I have just weeks to live. Here's what I want to pass on," TheGuardian.com, September 7, 2020.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Susan Sparks, *It's Still Life*

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God, who set the planets in motion and stretched out the heavens like a curtain; who imagined parakeets adorned in emerald and prancing antelopes and purple-robed irises — *You* are Lord of all time and all creation. We marvel at the work of your hands and rejoice that enjoying such masterpieces was not enough for you. How is it that you — the Maker of Heaven and Earth — should long to dwell among us, as near as our breath, as constant as our beating hearts? How is it that you should choose to be God *with* and *for* us?

We give thanks that you do not leave us orphaned, but abide with us every hour, every moment. By your Spirit you surround us with peace and teach us your truth; you plant the seeds of hope and fill us with joy; you intercede with sighs too deep for words. So we pray with confidence, trusting that you lean close to hear the petitions we voice, and that the Advocate fills the silence when words fail us.

We lift before you the concerns of our hearts, and pray for those who are ill, or lonely, or grieving; those who struggle with addiction, those who suffer from poverty in all its forms, those who endure the threat of violence.

We lift before you our deepest longings and our quiet worries, and every unspoken prayer that silence draws from our hearts ...

Holy God — our Comfort and our Guide — Give us grace to sense your presence among us, and open our hearts to the whisperings of your Spirit. Abide with us and empower us to keep your commandments, that we might bear witness to Christ through word and deed, praise and prayer, sacrifice and service.

It is in Christ's name that we pray, and that we offer the words he taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.