

A Deeper Joy

Psalm 126 *Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 *...for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
God has covered me with the robe of righteousness....*

A couple of weeks ago I watched a rerun of *The Newhart Show*. Remember that one? Bob Newhart plays Dick Loudon, who with his wife Joanna runs a quaint Vermont inn in a quaint Vermont town. The cast is both quaint and delightfully quirky. This episode was about Stephanie, the completely self-absorbed and materialistic young woman who has been employed as maid, though she avoids anything that involves dirt or messes, or work, for that matter. Stephanie somehow gets lost in the woods. After some hours, she stumbles upon the cabin which is home to three of the quirkiest cast members – Larry, his brother Darryl, and his other brother Darryl. The brothers graciously bring Stephanie back to the inn, where Dick and Joanna hold a kind of de-briefing session with her. What have you learned from this experience? Oh, says Stephanie, I learned so much. Here I was saved by these men who have so little by way of material things and yet seem so happy. And I am so grateful that they brought me back safely. Dick and Joanna push a little further. Did she think this experience was a way God was teaching her something about her values? Oh, yes, says Stephanie. I think God was saying to me, “Hold onto your values no matter what, even through the worst of experiences!” Stephanie’s experience of terror out in the woods and the kindness of the three poor but happy woodsmen had no effect on her except the relief that she could go on being the same as before. She survived the experience, but her experience did not change her.

The background of both Psalm 126 and Isaiah 61 is the Exile of the people of Israel in Babylon, when the people were removed from their homeland. Jerusalem was abandoned and the great Temple was in ruins. This was an experience of tremendous suffering, second only in the memory of the people to what had happened centuries earlier in Egypt. However, God would be experienced again as a liberating power. The people would hear good news of healing, comfort, and finally a return home. Their joy would not only be about surviving, but also about regaining their identity and purpose as a people of faith. It would be a deeper kind of joy.

The psalm is a brief and intense celebration of God’s saving power in the past, with an appeal to God for help in present circumstances. When God restored our fortunes, it was like a dream come true! Out of the nightmare of exile and suffering, we were suddenly in the bright daylight of freedom and prosperity once again. Who of us has not experienced something of this? We go through an experience that brings us into suffering – financially, emotionally, spiritually, physically. A relationship gone bad, a hope dashed, an embarrassing failure, a period of depression or despondency, an illness that brought us face to face with our mortality, a loved one’s pain that we would do anything to relieve. Then we come through the experience somehow, and we can’t believe it. We were in the depths of pain and despair; now we have come through. There have been times for all of us when we experienced the wondrous process that is at the heart of life itself, the movement from hopelessness to hope, from discouragement to confidence, from sickness to health, from brokenness to wholeness.

Remembering these experiences is an important spiritual practice that nourishes in us gratitude and joy.

“When God restored the fortunes of Zion” says the psalm. When I read this, I thought of our present economic situation as a nation and in the world. We are certainly in a very serious time of suffering and struggle. Those who suffer the most are always those who have the least. While some feel the suffering of seeing their stock portfolios dwindle, many more have lost homes and jobs and health care. Corporations have been seeking public money to rescue them from situations created by their own greed, lack of justice and compassion, and irresponsibility. In the mix of this economic situation is the accumulated effect of two wars that have brought destruction not only on the countries we have invaded but the lives and families of those who have been fighting the wars. If we are able and willing to take a clear-eyed look at ourselves, we can see and admit that we are a people, a nation, and a world that have wandered off and gotten lost in our own forest, our own exile. If all we want is to survive it and get back to business as usual, then nothing will have changed, and we will eventually face the same circumstances again. The point is not just to survive but to be transformed, not just to get through the experiences of struggle and suffering that come upon us, but to learn from them, to be shaped by them so that something better emerges in us and around us.

That’s what the words of Isaiah are about. God comes to Israel, and to us, with good news of liberation, healing, comfort, and the bringing of justice and compassion. There is a Power at the heart of life itself that is always moving toward and working for wholeness, freedom, and the well being of all people and the creation itself. We call that Power God. And during these days of Advent and Christmas, we reflect on how that Power was embodied in and expressed through the life of a human being like us, Jesus who calls and empowers us to be who we were created to be, to follow him in the way of true living as the human part of this good creation of God.

God is always working toward our well being and that of the whole earth. This is good news. But it is not just so that we escape disaster or survive bad experiences. It is so that we become, through our experiences, who we truly are, who God made us to be – those who are ourselves repairers of the ruined cities, rebuilders of life, bringers of good news. Isaiah puts it all together in verse 10. “...for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation” – that speaks of God’s saving power in our lives, what God does for us. Then, “God has covered me with the robe of righteousness” – that speaks of the right, compassionate, and loving ways God has made us to live with one another and the earth. We are not just to survive, to regain our prosperity; we are to become a different people from the way we were living that brought us into this mess. We are to become who we really and truly are – a people of God’s saving love and God’s righteousness.

Pema Chodron is an American Tibetan Buddhist teacher at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in North America. Her books express a spiritual and practical depth that can benefit us as Christians. I have been re-reading Chodron’s book COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY, and these words jumped out at me as I was working with the scripture readings for today: “When things fall apart, instead of struggling to regain our concept of who we are, we can use it as an opportunity to be open and inquisitive about what has just happened and what will happen next. That is how to turn this arrow into a flower.”(COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY, p. 41) This is a Buddhist insight, that throughout our lives, we experience many arrows, things that hurt, disrupt, disturb, cause suffering. But these can be turned into flowers through patience, compassion, and insight. Instead of, like Stephanie, just hunkering down and defending our territory, as it were, which only intensifies the suffering, we can become open and fluid. We can pay attention to what is

happening in our lives, understand the how's and why's of our responses, and receive the insight and wisdom that will ease the suffering. Instead of putting up walls of defensiveness and fear, we can enter into our experiences, learn from them, and discover that our experiences, especially the painful ones, are the way God is teaching and liberating us, bringing growth and deepening.

Christianity in its own way bears the message that through suffering we come to new life, that suffering is not something to be avoided but to be entered into so that we touch the renewing power of God and God's love. That is really the message of the Advent and Christmas season. It is not a time to enter into tinsel and nostalgic escape from our struggles and suffering, either as individuals or as a people. It is a time to embrace what we are experiencing, to recognize that there are times when we go forth weeping, sowing in tears. But we also discover, if our hearts are open enough, that there is a Power at work in life that enables us to reap with joy, to return home with joy, carrying a harvest. It is not just about surviving or regaining what we had before. It is about becoming new people, the people God made us to be, a people of compassion, generosity, just and right relationships, and love. Again, it is about that inward journey we talk about and try to work with as best we can. It is the way of giving attention to what is going on in us and around us, and shining on it the light of our awareness of God's presence and love, and the good news that God comes to bring us renewed life. When we are on that spiritual journey, we learn how to let God's love for us turn the arrows of suffering into the flowers of the fullness of our humanity. God clothes us with saving love. God wraps us in the royal robes of righteousness, of right living. Our joy is not just that we have survived, but that we are becoming who God made us to be.