

December 11, 2011 / Third Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

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....*

Do you remember *The Newhart Show*? Bob Newhart played Dick Loudon, who with his wife Joanna, ran a quaint Vermont inn in a quaint Vermont town. The cast was quaint, too, and delightfully quirky. This time of year I remember an episode that centered on Stephanie, the completely self-absorbed and materialistic young woman employed as maid, though she avoided anything that involved dirt or messes, or work, for that matter. Stephanie had gotten lost in the woods. After stumbling around in fright for a good while, she happened upon the cabin of the three quirkiest cast members – Larry, his brother Darryl, and his other brother Darryl. The brothers heroically bring Stephanie back to the inn, where Dick and Joanna question her about her experience. What have you learned from this experience? Oh, says Stephanie, I learned so much. 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!” Stephanie’s experience of being lost 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 exactly the same as before. There is the kind of joy that comes from simply avoiding or surviving difficult experiences. There is the deeper joy of learning from our experiences, letting them teach and shape us.

The background of Psalm 126 and Isaiah 61 is the return of the people from Exile in Babylon. The Exile was a personal and national experience of tremendous suffering and dislocation. However, God would become known again as liberating power. Upon returning home, the people would hear good news of healing, comfort, and rebuilding. Their joy would not only be about surviving, but, more importantly, regaining

their identity and purpose as a people of faith. I think that is what the joy of our faith is about. It is not about escaping or simply surviving difficult or painful experiences, but gaining from our experience wisdom, insight, compassion, growth, a deeper knowledge of who we really are and what really matters. That is the deeper kind of joy.

Psalm 126 is a celebration of God's saving power that brought the people out of Exile. It is also an appeal to God for help in the present circumstances of rebuilding their life. 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 once again. I think we have all experienced something of this. We go through an experience that brings us into suffering – the death of a loved one, a relationship gone bad, a hope dashed, a crushing failure, a period of depression or despondency, an illness that faces us with our mortality, a loved one's pain that we would do anything to relieve. As communities and a nation we go through such experiences, like our wars that devastate other peoples and ourselves, or a natural disaster of some sort. Then we come through the experience, and it is like a dream come true. We were in the depths of pain and despair; now we have life and hope. In this way, 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. Of course, those who suffer the most are always those who have the least. In the current situation, the poor are even being blamed for their poverty and the wealthy lauded as somehow moral, a complete reversal of everything the gospels, indeed all of scripture, say to us. We are a people, a nation, and a world that have wandered off and gotten lost in an exile of our own making. If all we want is to survive it and get back to business as usual, we might regain our material prosperity, but will surely continue our spiritual poverty. 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 is what the words of Isaiah are about. The servant of God speaks 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. 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. Yet, it is not just so that we escape disaster or survive bad experiences. God is not interested in just saving our skins! It is so that we become, through our experiences, who we truly are, who God made us to be – those who are 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. In her book *COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY*, these words jumped out at me in relation to 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 the insight that throughout our lives we experience many arrows, things that hurt, disrupt, disturb, cause suffering. We can receive these arrows and become bitter, angry, self-pitying, blaming everyone and everything else for our misery. Or we can convert the arrows into flowers through patience, compassion, and insight. That is the work of our ongoing, daily inward journey. Instead of, like Stephanie, just hunkering down and defending our territory, as it were, which only perpetuates and 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.

Over the years, some of you have asked about my experience as a conscientious objector, which set me to remembering and thinking about my two years of alternative service in light of these texts. Kaye and I moved to Boston at the end of college, where we both worked at Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center. It was new and exciting, but also unknown and frightening. For me there was, after a few months, a severe bout of anxiety and depression, which also led me and us to some new friendships. There was loneliness at times and feeling that I would never be able to get on with the further studies I still wanted to undertake. There were moments when emptying the bedpans and urinals, and changing the soiled bedclothes of my young patients felt like a sacred ministry, and times when it felt dismal and oppressive. There was the joy of being loved and trusted by children facing difficult and sometimes unsuccessful treatments. There was the pain of losing some of them to death. It was a time in my life when I was forced to let go of just about everything familiar and most of my self-concepts. There were times when I just wanted it to be over so I could move on. Yet, when the two years ended, I knew I was a different person, less self-assured, less prone to think I knew how the world works, and more open to life in its very mixed reality. I did go on to seminary, but my studies had a whole different motivation than that which might have been. I was seeking answers and understanding grounded in life and its realities and experiences. That is where I wanted to know God and God's presence and reality. It was an arrow I had been able to turn into a flower. I had begun to learn something about that deeper kind of joy.

Our experiences of struggle and suffering are not something to be avoided but 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 for a 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. Yet, 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 carrying a harvest. It is not just about surviving or regaining what we had before. It is not about holding onto our ideas about life or the identities we have built up for ourselves no matter what. It is about becoming the persons and community God made, calls, and empowers us to be, a people of compassion, generosity, just and right

relationships, and love. When we are on that journey, we learn what it means to have that deeper joy that, I think, Paul was getting at when he wrote to the Thessalonian community: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances....”