

December 14, 2014 / Third Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

A Deeper Kind of 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....*

On this Third Sunday in Advent, when these particular texts come up in the lectionary, I remember an episode from years ago on *The Newhart Show*. Bob Newhart played Dick Loudon, who with his wife Joanna, ran a quaint Vermont inn in a quaint Vermont town. The story centered on Stephanie, the self-absorbed and materialistic young woman employed as maid, who 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 characters—Larry, his brother Darryl, and his other brother Darryl. The brothers return Stephanie to the inn, where Dick and Joanna question her about her experience. What have you learned from this? Oh, says Stephanie, I learned so much. I was saved by these men who have so little 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 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 surviving difficult experiences. There is the deeper joy of learning from our experiences, being shaped by them, and coming to a deeper, richer awareness of life.

The background of Psalm 126 and Isaiah 61 is the return of the people from exile in Babylon in the latter part of the 6th century BCE. The exile was a personal and national experience of suffering and dislocation. However, through that experience, the people would know God once again as liberating and healing power. They would hear good news of comfort, and encouragement for the rebuilding of their lives. 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—gaining from even our difficult experiences wisdom, insight,

compassion, growth, a deeper knowledge of who we really are and what really matters.

Psalm 126 celebrates God's saving power that worked for the people's freedom from oppression. It is also an appeal to God for help in the rebuilding their life. When God restored our fortunes, brought us from the darkness of exile into the daylight of freedom, it was like a dream come true! Maybe we have known something of this. We go through an experience that brings us into suffering—the death of a loved one, a broken relationship, a hope dashed, a 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 events today that reveal continuing racism and violence against women. Last week brought the incredible action of the U.S. House of Representatives in stealing 2,400 acres of sacred Apache Nation land to put in the hands of a French/Australian mining company. Our decimation of the native people of this land continues. If we as persons or as a nation face these difficult things with a willingness to be changed, we will find ourselves and life changed for the better. We can experience and be part of the process that is at the heart of life itself, the movement from hopelessness to hope, discouragement to confidence, injustice to just and right relationships, brokenness to wholeness. That is the source of true 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 world. Poverty in this nation is increasing, with a shrinking middle class. The wealth of a relatively few is growing exponentially. The poor are blamed for their poverty and the wealthy lauded as moral, which is a complete reversal of everything the gospels, indeed all of scripture, say to us. For instance, when Mary becomes aware of the significance of the child she is carrying, she sings a song with these words(Lk 1:46-55): *God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.* We are in an exile of our own making. If all we want is to survive and get back to business as usual, retaining the same values that have created these situations, we will continue on the path of our own destruction and our spiritual poverty. When the psalm speaks of God restoring our fortunes, it means the fortune of living as God created us to live. The people of Israel were not only returned to their geographical home, but also to their spiritual home, their life as people of God living out God's compassion, mercy, justice, and love.*

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. How is it that the prophet speaks God's words? *I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing.* It is

absolutely clear that persons or a nation that claim to serve God will live out these qualities in personal and public life. 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.

Isaiah puts it all together in verse 10: *...for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation.* That speaks of God's saving, healing 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 different from the way we were before. 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. In her book *COMFORTABLE WITH UNCERTAINTY*, these words resonated with our 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) Throughout our lives we experience many arrows, things that hurt, disrupt, disturb, cause suffering. When arrows come, we can become bitter, angry, self-pitying, blaming others or the world 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, hunkering down and defending our territory, as it were, which only makes things worse, we can become open and fluid. Instead of putting up walls of defensiveness and fear, we can enter into our experiences, learn from them, and find that our painful experiences are important sources of wisdom, learning, growth, and a greater wholeness, which is the meaning of the world "salvation". That's where we find deeper joy.

Whenever I reflect on these things—how our experiences can bring us to a deeper joy--my memory calls up the years Kaye and I lived in Boston soon after we were married. We both worked at Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center, where I was serving two years of civilian service as a conscientious objector. It was all new and exciting, but also unknown and frightening. After a few months, I experienced a period of severe anxiety and depression, which

also brought growth and some new friendships. There was loneliness at times and the feeling that I had fallen behind my friends who were moving ahead with their education and careers. I had not yet learned that life is not a competition but a classroom! There were moments when emptying the bedpans and urinals, and changing the bedclothes of my young patients felt like sacred work, and times when it felt dismal and oppressive. There was the joy of being loved and trusted by children with serious cardiac problems, and being part of their comfort and support as they went through the often-frightening experience of hospitalization, treatments, and surgeries. There was the pain of losing some of them to death. It was a time when I was forced to let go of just about everything familiar, including my self-concepts. 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 the wonderful and terrible reality of life. Working with the children and the nursing staff had deepened in me the knowledge that compassion, service, and humility are the doorways to life's meaning. By the time I entered seminary, I had a different motivation. (I sometimes refer to the Boston years as my real seminary education.) I was much less in my head, simply accumulating knowledge, and much more seeking spiritual and theological insights and ideas that made sense within and helped me to speak of life's realities and experiences. As time went on, looking back on those years, I understood that I had been able to turn the arrow into a flower. I had learned more about how and where to find that deeper kind of joy.

The Advent and Christmas season is not really a time for a tinsel and nostalgic escape from the difficult things of life. It is a time to embrace even our most difficult experiences, to recognize that there are times when we go forth weeping, sowing in tears. Yet, we discover, if we keep our hearts open in every experience we face, that there is a Power at work in life and in us that enables us to reap with joy, to return home carrying a harvest. Two weeks ago we heard these words from Isaiah 64: *Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.* It is about our letting God continue to shape us as persons and a community in compassion, generosity, just and right relationships, and love. That will bring us the joy that comes from living out of our true selves, which includes being of service to others and the world. I had a conversation recently about this very thing, that we so often experience happiness when we are doing something for others. We do not love and serve others in order to feel good, but when we are serving others and the world, we are acting out of our true, God-created selves. It fulfills who we are, and that gives rise to joy.

When we are on this journey, we experience more and more that deeper joy of which

Paul to the Thessalonian community: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.*