

ADVENT THREE, DECEMBER 12, 2021

The Anglican priest, author and teacher, Herbert O'Driscoll tells this story about his uncle. "As World War II was ending, my uncle was about to be discharged from the Royal Navy. He decided to enjoy an evening out and bought a ticket to see a play in London. It was the opening night of a new show. He was not quite sure what the show was about, but he heard that it was a musical, a musical from America."

O'Driscoll's uncle also didn't really care what he was going to see. All he wanted to do was celebrate the fact that he had lived through the war and that he would soon be going home. The first thing he noticed when he entered the theatre was the brilliant light in the entryway. For six years, he and members of his generation had to get used to muted lighting and sometimes in the blackouts, no lighting whatsoever. Now at least in this warm and welcoming and crowded space, the world was suddenly bright again. Another thing he noticed was how alive and excited everyone was. And in surprise, he realized that their festive mood was affecting him and that he felt the same way. It seems that joy can be infectious. But nothing prepared him for what happened when the curtain went up. The stage blazed with light of a sunlit world stretching into infinite distances. The dancers and actors positively leapt onto the stage. The music was electrifying. The words of the opening song transformed every listener. "Oh what a beautiful morning, Oh what a beautiful day, I've got a wonderful feeling, everything's going my way." Well, we know what song that was and the musical, of course, is *Oklahoma*. It burst into the dark world of war torn Europe like a sudden blaze of sunshine and hope and possibility and joy.

Today is known as "Gaudete" or "Rejoice" Sunday because it's a day when we anticipate and celebrate delight — God's delight in us, and our delight in God's salvation. But what does it mean to really rejoice or to have joy. Sometimes we confuse rejoicing with the concept of joy that is routinely manipulated by advertisers with the cacophony of buying the latest and greatest gift to bring you happiness.

Rejoicing isn't about cheerfulness that refuses to look at the complexities of real life in the face. Sometimes we behave as if our faith and God is too fragile to handle life's dark side without walking around with fake smiles or sending texts with grinning emojis.

I believe our spiritual ancestors, Zephaniah and Paul, might have something to teach us in this regard. These writers didn't approach joy from a place of denial, obliviousness, or cheap frivolity. Zephaniah writes in the context of terrible spiritual and political corruption, perpetrated by the very leaders who were supposed to care for the poor and the oppressed of Judah. Given that context, it comes as a major surprise that Zephaniah describes God's joy over his people, in spite of their failures. Zephaniah describes that joy in terms of God singing and dancing over God's people. The picture is almost as if God were a wedding couple at a Jewish wedding being lifted onto the shoulders of the dancing guests.

In the Epistle letter this morning, Paul wrote his words of joy to his friends in Philippi while he sat in a prison cell, awaiting what was an almost certain execution. In spite of that setting, he was able to write those powerful words of hope and affirmation. For Zephaniah and Paul the joy doesn't come from having a happy ending, but from having the assurance of God's supporting presence in spite of what might happen.

That isn't the way we normally think of joy. We've somehow convinced ourselves that joy can only be the result of having everything letter perfect and in its place. It's kind

of the “don’t worry, be happy” joy. Unfortunately, that image of joy is nothing more than an illusion. True joy, it seems to me, does not necessarily come from what takes place on the outside of our lives, but what comes from within. At the heart of our faith is a sense of Joy. It is primarily an inner joy that no matter what happens in our lives we know God’s presence in our midst. We are known by God and loved by God.

Sometime ago, I read about a pastor who remarked about the distinction between the way the world prepares for Christmas and the way the church prepares. According to this pastor, the world prepares by looking for happiness, which he defined as being dependent on having things just right, getting the correct gifts, and being filled with the “spirit of Christmas”, which is that elusive, fleeting, warm feeling one gets when everything is in place and cozy.

That kind of expectation can’t be sustained in the sometimes harsh realities of a world filled with such things as terrorism, war, injustice, pandemics, homelessness and violence in our streets and homes and schools.

On the other hand, this pastor said that the church prepares for Christmas by looking for joy, which comes from the reality of a Savior who is born in a stable and who comes to us in the midst of our dark, broken and needy lives. He said that joy is to be found in all the imperfections of life, in having no need to paint fake smiles over our pain, in being aware that Emmanuel — that is, God with us — remains with us no matter what the circumstances of our lives may be. Christian joy comes from our certainty about the unwavering love God showed in the stable of Bethlehem and on the cross of Calvary.

Another story that reflects this understanding of joy comes from the novelist Ruth Harnden who wrote a story about her mother and the relationship she maintained with Hilda, the Scandinavian woman who spoke broken English and had served as the family cook for many years. Then, late in life, Hilda married and moved away to Oregon.

The author described Hilda as “a plain woman with rough hands and a thick body. And Hilda wasn’t much for frills, so Harnden’s mother used to knit practical things for Hilda to wear in her mountain home.

One Christmas, Harnden’s mother knitted Hilda six pairs of woolen socks. She also purchased a beautiful cream-colored satin nightgown with a lace bodice for her granddaughter Janie’s honeymoon. And she mailed them both off. Afterward, she had this uneasy feeling that she might have mixed the two packages up. She knew that she could easily make things right with her granddaughter, but she worried that Hilda might be offended if she received the nightgown.

A few days after Christmas, she got an email from her granddaughter asking how she had guessed that the honeymoon was to be a week of skiing, and expressing thanks for the beautiful handmade ski socks. Then her heart sank because she knew that she would have to write Hilda to explain what had happened. But before she could do that, she received a letter from Hilda which said this:

“Old Hilda, everyone thinks, is only in need of things to keep her warm. So they send the sweaters, the mittens, the socks. What could make her pretty, such a one? But you, my old friend, you have the other heart, the other eyes, and I am beautiful now. I open up the [...] stove so the room is full of heat, and I put on my beautiful dress made for dancing — and what you think? I dance! Old Hilda dance! Can you think of it? And my Tim he come and dance with me. Ha, I think my Tim he fall in love with me all over again. You make my heart dance, too. You love so big.”

This story resonates with what Christian hope is all about — the belief that God can take our mistakes and sins, our heartaches and fears, and transform them into something life-affirming and good. God loves so big that God can make our hearts dance in any situation.

What a heart warming Advent gift to know that we can rejoice in God's love no matter what. Even if we have nothing more than God's love to hold on to, the knowledge of that love is empowering and liberating and the source of our true joy. Amen.