

YEAR B ~ Advent 3 ~ December 11, 2011
CHRISTMAS IS NOT YOUR BIRTHDAY - #3
SEEDS OF JOY – SACRIFICE AND SUFFERING

Some of you have seen our mug board. This is one of my least favorite. It always strikes me as “Pollyanna,” denying the real struggles. Life is good? Really?

The truth is, life is often not good and almost always difficult. Who would use this mug? Perhaps God, who at creation declared his intention for life to be good. Perhaps Isaiah, who announces life will be good. Maybe the psalmist, who acknowledges that life hasn’t been so good but asks God to make it so again. Maybe Paul would use it. He says, no matter what, life can be good. Surprisingly Jesus, who more than anyone, has experienced the harshness of life, promises not just good, but joyful life. This Savior of the world, who begins life in a stable and ends life on a cross, says joy is not just a possibility; but a present reality. In Jesus, God comes to us to declare that creation is becoming good once again.

Along with hope and peace, joy is also on Jesus’ gift list. However some assembly is required. Hope takes expecting a miracle through our wanting, watching, and waiting. Peace takes preparing for God’s presence through repentance. Joy comes from planting seeds that God brings to harvest.

SEEDS OF SACRIFICE

Joy is born from the seeds of sacrifice. Mike Slaughter reminds us in his book – *Christmas is Not Your Birthday*, that Jesus wishes for us to know the joy of being the body of Christ, his hands and feet in the world. Born in a feeding trough and dying as a criminal, Jesus says joy is found in self-sacrifice not self-focus. He ought to know.

In fact, Jesus tells us that (Mike Slaughter:) “the more of ourselves that we give away, the more abundant our joy will be.” This sounds like nails on the chalkboard to a culture that teaches us that joy is found in acquiring and achieving. Even for those of us who know there’s more to life than the world’s way of joy, we still have to survive in this world – in jobs and schools and activities that wear us down and tear us apart. To hear that joy is found in self-giving, your reaction might understandably be – “there is no more left to give.” The world’s promised sources of joy dictate our priorities, run our schedules, and dominate our lives until there is nothing left to give and we feel trapped in a totally joyless existence. The advent scriptures point us away from the world’s demands, and towards the sacrifice of (Mike Slaughter:) “living on less when we could have more, in order to give away more for others. “It isn’t easy. It is sacrifice.”

Joy is response to good news. Jesus’ way to joy through sacrifice doesn’t sound much like good news. So what is good news to us? Is it finding the right gift under the Christmas tree; a raise or a promotion; our team winning the championship; a hole-in-one; a home run, a goal, a touch down; straight A’s and making the honor roll? Yes these are all good news. But they are also all about the world’s way of accumulating and achieving that offers joy that is short-lived at best. They are nothing compared to the extraordinary good news proclaimed today by Isaiah. How can you compare anything to a world without poverty, disease, broken

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hearts, grief, prisoners, or captives –where all suffering is relieved? How can our response to the joys of the world be so much greater than this good news of a new way of life for all people?

(Mike Slaughter:) “Jesus is not saving us to get us into heaven, but to get heaven into us. Jesus doesn’t come to save us for some far off heaven but for a redemptive re-creation of this world.” The joy of salvation is not other-worldly, but this-worldly. You are created to be the channel through which God’s blessing flows to others. Heavenly joy can flow to, through, and from us – right here right now if we are willing to sow the seeds of self-sacrifice -giving ourselves for the sake of others.

SEEDS OF SUFFERING

Joy is born from the seeds of suffering. Joy is transformed suffering. We plant. God transforms. The One who transforms death to life can certainly transform suffering to joy. There is no suffering, no sorrow, no loss, no death, no broken dream that God cannot transform.

The hard truth is that joy and suffering are inseparable. We can’t have one without the other. We couldn’t recognize one without the other. The psalmist reminds us that joy is born from suffering and sorrow. Sowing in tears means reaping in joy. Sorrow is a necessary first stage on the way to joy. Tears fit us for joy. Our tears water the seeds of suffering. God’s love transforms seeds of suffering to a harvest of joy.

St. Paul instructed the Thessalonians, as he instructs us planting seeds of suffering means to “rejoice always; pray without ceasing; and give thanks in all circumstances.” And you thought sacrifice wasn’t easy? Rejoicing, praying, giving thanks in the midst of sorrow and suffering is an act of (David Bartlett:) “Putting seed into ground under quite unpromising circumstances.” But we can either plant the seeds or hold on to them staying stuck in our suffering. And the results of this planting are guaranteed. As Paul says, it is “the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” When you rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks continually with your lips and your lives, you will experience your suffering transformed to joy.

Advent is not just remembering that Jesus came, but why Jesus came – to usher in the joy of living in God’s presence that begins now and will become total and complete in the future. God comes to the world for one purpose – to transform not just our personal lives but the life of world. Imagine the end of the injustice of poverty, abuse, hunger, oppression, war. Could there be any greater joy? That’s what Jesus wants for Christmas – to fill us with the true and deep joy of God’s promised and present transformation of the world that God invites us to be a part of.

HARVEST OF JOY

Perhaps I’ll give that mug another try. Even though life is not always good, and life is always hard, God is always good. God’s transformation can be difficult to see. But Christmas,

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the incarnation; the coming of God with skin on, is a miraculous time where it is easier to catch a glimpse of divine transformation as even the secular world gives into it.

Holiday traditions can become visible signs of God's salvation for us and for others. Like John the Baptist we are called to allow the signs to point to Jesus. Evergreen trees symbolize Christ's promise of eternal life. Bright lights tell us that Jesus is the light that has come into the world that no darkness can extinguish. The parties, the food, the music can all be signs of rejoicing at the possibilities for God's transformation of the world. Baking shows God transforming the work of our hands. And gift giving can be a reminder that in Jesus, God has given us the greatest gift of all – himself.

When Advent is a time for planting; a time to practice rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks, instead of a season of tireless activities leading to near-exhaustion and fatigue; you will find that like Isaiah, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon you because he has anointed you" for God's work of transforming the world. Jesus' followers are called to find joy by being part of God's work - planting seeds of joy. Just as God sent Jesus to intervene in the world of evil, so he now sends us with his power to bring light into dark places. Your self-giving is the evidence that the Messiah of God's Kingdom is present, transforming suffering into joy. Jesus' true followers are not just sitting together in religious meetings passively waiting for his return but are actively working in his name to rebuild and restore the brokenness. Planting seeds of sacrifice and suffering is the way of true joy that runs against the grain of society's obsession of "me, more, bigger, better." Everyone who recognizes Jesus as Messiah is a servant of his mission. That is what Jesus desires – for us to be the living body of Christ in the world; loving others as Jesus loves us.

Christmas is not your birthday – it is Jesus' birthday. We can celebrate his birthday in a way that honors him by planting the seeds of joy through our sacrifice and suffering that God will transform into a harvest of unending overflowing joy.

You are joy to the world!

Amen.