

Philippians 4:4-7 The Joys of Life
Zephaniah 3:14-20
December 15, 2024

Biblical faith has always insisted that the message of God is the source of a miraculous joy, and should be met with celebration. Christmas and Easter experiences are joyful in themselves, and it is easy to see why in those circumstances there came to be exhortations to celebrate.

It is always good to remember that the recipients of the gospel message are, "all those living in darkness," that is, people who live in the real world and experience all of its contradictions and distortions, along with its beauties and wonders.

The Israelites themselves were called to rejoice even in the face of their conquerors. One feels an affinity with Mary at the Annunciation, when she said, "How can this be?" But the admonitions of which we speak are also addressed to every period in life, and every season, even those that are not so obvious.

The joy of Paul in Philippians is a case in point. It is directly associated neither with Easter or Christmas, nor with any particular tragedy, but with God's miraculous presence in every situation. Perhaps we might think of the command to rejoice as referring not only to the light and the dark times, but also the everyday times when the words we use to describe our lives are more neutral.

When things are going well and happiness is natural, the trick is to have joy not because life is in order, but because of God's love towards us, revealed in Christ Jesus. The trick when there are difficulties and hardships, or maybe just boredom, is to cultivate and maintain a more grounded foundation of joy *in Christ*.

Let us consider the everyday things in life that bring us happiness. The joys of life can be fleeting, and sometimes pass us by to no affect; or, they are signs that point us to even deeper joys. In this sense they are like the hardships in life, which either serve only destructive ends, or else they draw us to heaven because, as Paul has taught us, they build perseverance, which produces character, which produces hope which does not disappoint. They serve as teachers to instruct the mercy and grace of God and lead us upward. Whether it is joy or sorrow or everyday life, we are drawn towards heaven. Every experience of life is given meaning.

I am sure each of us has ideas about the joys of life. For me, as for many others, there is nature, among other things. I was walking the other day through a field that was bordered by a stand of trees. In the trees was a large flock of birds, I don't know what kind, starlings maybe, small birds, but making a racket that sounded like hundreds of children in a gymnasium all talking at once.

And then, everything went silent . . . or at least, the birds became silent. The next moment they lifted off into the wind and in one massive movement flew away

to the south, I assume on the way to warmer places for the winter.

On another walk, the obviously migrating bird filled up the tree in the yard behind the National Guard Armory, and looked like the sparks from fireworks as they mushroomed up and around only to resetttle back in the tree.

Later I came upon a deer that matched in color the browns of winter, which have their own beauty in contrast to the magnificent colors of spring, the greens of summer or the flaming reds and oranges and yellows that bless us in the fall. It stared at me as I approached, almost camouflaged as it stood on the path, and then darted into the wood on some unknown and unseeable path.

And there is the world of books, although I doubt I am as much a bibliophile as others. This world of books has gotten past the point of conquering. There are so many books now that one could do nothing but read from sunup to sundown everyday for a lifetime and never scratch the surface.

I am one of those stuck in time who believes that Kindle is a loss to humanity. It did not add anything, but just took away the concreteness of a book, an actual book with paper and pages that can be turned and that has a unique smell, either of the newness of a new book, or even the ones that have sat on a shelf in a library for decades gathering musty dust.

Or there is the whole world of art and sports. I know there are other endeavors and many varied expressions among these categories. I also know that my tastes are different than most others that I meet. But I am drawn happily to them because they reflect the physical and intellectual and psychological struggles involved in the pursuit of excellence and beauty. So far as we know, we are the only species in the universe that can pursue such interests.

Even though I do not believe that there is any connection between human achievement and salvation, other than the giftedness of it all, I enjoy watching those who struggle this struggle, and achieve, well, certainly more than I ever have; and I hope for them that the struggle will be worth it, that it will not consume them, or distort their humanity. There is more than an interest in them, more than a respect, though few may think of it this way - there is a joy.

There is a celebration of life that is a part of human excellence that can involve everyone, for each person can not only witness the highest human achievements, and thus take part in them, but also be inspired to seek to improve themselves as well, even as we know that our hope is *not* in those achievements, rather, in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a beauty in *human living*, and it meets us in the simple things like the singing of birds or the reading of a book, and also in the great things like the winning of a championship or the performance of a

great symphony. And these can point us to an even greater joy, one that comes as gift; the gift of life, of eternal life, of God's merciful acceptance of us as we *are*, without obligation or requirement, only faith, which liberates so that life is full.

Either all these things are utterly meaningless, or they point in the direction of the grand vision that meets us in the birth of Jesus, who brings a joy that rises above all earthly things, and etches itself in our hearts, in our lives.

The source of this joy is, of course, the gospel itself, that God loves us and has made provision for our salvation. It means that our sins have been forgiven, and that the question of mortality, the limitations we bear, both the physical limitations and those associated with morality, have been resolved in our favor, as a gift from God. It means the evil we do fades like a mist, like the sting of death, which is no more.

Let us then, draw *this* conclusion, that Christian joy is not tethered to *any* circumstance in life; or perhaps it is better stated that Christian joy is attached to only one circumstance, and not any other immediate situation in our lives; that we have been loved and accepted by God. In this great text from Philippians we are being asked to accept this gift regardless of whatever is happening around or in us.

It means that the love we are instructed to give to others is only a shadow of the divine love that has been given to us. At some point, even if the persistent

difficulties in life, and the anxiety attended to them, continue to threaten us, they come to have no hold over our lives, our inner lives, in the depths of which resides a joyousness not conditioned on anything we do, and that withstands every arrow slung against it, So that we agree with the prophets of Israel when they tell us to sing, shout aloud, to be glad and rejoice with all our hearts,

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