

“An Altogether Joy” - Luke 1:35-49 - Rev. Jeffrey B. Childs

This is the fourth Sunday of Advent. Over the last three weeks we have looked at “Altogether Peace,” “Altogether Hope” and “Altogether Love.” Today we will look at “An Altogether Joy” by Matt Rowle who wrote - Especially during this hectic time of the year, we need to remember that we are justified by faith and freely saved by grace -and that this is “altogether joy.” We heard about this in the scripture this morning, *When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.* (Luke 1:41-44 NRSV)

He described an “almost joy” as an emotion we often feel during the holiday season like one of the good feelings we receive and share. It may be happy as “*Happy Holidays!*” or merriment as in “*Merry Christmas!*” But in contrast an “altogether joy” can only truly be received by God’s grace and mercy. It is the steadfast assurance that God is with us. This means it can be received even in the midst of pain. As it says in the psalms, “*weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.*” (Psalm 30:5 NRSV)

Matt pointed out that in Charles Wesley’s famous Christmas carol “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” the last line of the first stanza sets the tone for how John and Charles Wesley understood the nature of joy: “*God and sinners reconciled.*” For Wesley, salvation and joy go hand in hand. There is no joy for those who feel there is no forgiveness. There is no joy for those who have no assurance of salvation. Without joy there is little for which to give thanks. Joy comes from knowing that God is near, and salvation is offered to all.

David E. Leininger, in his *Collected Sermons*, tells a story that will bring tears of joy. In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics. They were invited to teach at a large orphanage to about 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government. That December it was time for the orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas - about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and the orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, they gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins as no other colored paper was available in the city. The children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel were used for the baby’s blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from a piece of tan felt. The orphans were busy assembling their manger as the teachers walked among them to see if they needed any help.

All went well until they got to one table where little Misha sat -- he looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As they looked at the little boy’s manger, they were startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly, they called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him

and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately, until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma, and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So, I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." So, I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him---for always." As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him -- FOR ALWAYS. That is an altogether Joy. Joy to the World! May you experience and share such Joy this year. Alleluia and Amen.

Leap for Joy

Jeffrey B. Childs 12/14/2024

When you feel the love of Jesus. Leap for joy!
When you feel the love of Jesus. Leap for joy!
When you feel you are forgiven,
And your faith leads you to heaven,
Praise the Lord along the journey. Leap for joy!

When you share the love of Jesus. Leap for joy!
When you share the love of Jesus. Leap for joy!
When the Good News you can share,
With the people everywhere,
And then some become believers. Leap for joy!

When you know how low you have been. Weep for joy!
When you know how low you have been. Weep for joy!
When you know where you have been,
Yet the Lord forgives your sin.
Praise the Lord for your salvation. Weep for joy!

When your life on earth is finished. Weep for joy!
When your life on earth is finished. Weep for joy!
When you've given all you've got,
And the good fight you have fought,
Go meet those who've gone before you. Weep for joy!