

“Despite!”

Advent III, December 16, 2018

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Eagle River, Wisconsin

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Text: Philippians 4:4-7

Christmas is, by reputation, a happy season. The images on our television screens are those of ideal families, always of the traditional variety, assembled around a Christmas tree; or we see the undiluted glee of the young woman who has just gotten as a Christmas present that piece of jewelry that demonstrates, beyond all doubt, that this guy really loves her after all. You have to wonder about the future of this relationship if such proof is required. And then there are those country houses featured in the beer ads, all festively lit, houses that are so quaint that they can only be reached by horse-drawn sleigh. Christmas happiness is often a romanticized happiness.

Some of us romanticize Christmas because we expect it to be, and desperately want it to be, a suspension of our real lives. We're like those soldiers during the First World War, one hundred years ago, who, on Christmas Eve, dropped their weapons, climbed out of the trenches from which they had been blasting away at each other, sang Christmas carols together in their different languages, and for one brief and blessed moment stopped the mass slaughter that characterized that awful war. Of course the next day they were back in the trenches and the carnage continued. And we remember all those wars where there has been the “traditional

Christmas Eve ceasefire,” presumably to please the Prince of Peace on his birthday.

Although many of us have very happy recollections of Christmases past, I would also guess also that at least some of us, in our most honest moments, can also recall Christmases that were bitterly disappointing, Christmases when the family problems that we hoped would be patched up, or at least papered over, by “the spirit of Christmas” were instead magnified by the contrast between fevered expectation and harsh reality. Sometimes Christmas doesn’t paper over our real lives; it functions as a magnifying glass focused on them. We remember Christmases when, as we cleaned up the wrappings and began to dismantle the decorations, we asked ourselves, “Is *that* what we were waiting for? Is *that* all there is?” Too often, Christmas leaves people with a painful emptiness, a sense of unfulfilled expectation. Or, if we’re not in that idealized happy family gathered around the tree, or in an intact family at all, Christmas can prompt an excruciating loneliness.

Over the past weeks we’ve been drawing contrasts between Advent themes and the pale reflections of those themes, impostors really, that can deceive or mislead us. So two weeks ago, we spoke of the hope that differs from optimism in that hope exists, even flourishes, in spite of the facts while optimism is based upon a self-interested reading of the facts. And we spoke last week of a peace that is far deeper than silence, the apparent absence of conflict, of a peace that cannot be imposed, but rather springs from within us; peace that is a product of hope and is the fruit of salvation. And today we speak of joy, joy that is a more profound emotion than happiness, joy that is radically different from the transient pleasure that we too often associate with Christmas and all its often disappointing hype.

The joy of Christmas is, first of all, a defiant “despite.” Like hope, it doesn’t depend on favorable circumstances. In fact, it thrives in adversity. Today’s reading from Paul’s epistle to the Philippians is a part of what might be called his ode to joy. Paul never strikes us as being a particularly happy-go-lucky fellow. But in this one letter alone—and it is one of the shortest books of the Bible—Paul writes the word “joy” or “rejoice” no fewer than fourteen times, which I’m told is eight more times than John Calvin used it in his three-volume *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. (I confess that I haven’t read the whole thing.) Paul wrote his letter while he was in prison, facing a likely trial and possible execution for undermining the Roman Empire. In fact, Paul’s joy seems to be heightened, rather than dimmed, by his difficult circumstances. Listen to him again. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, ‘Rejoice!’” Or earlier in the same letter he says, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing of the spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete.” Joy is the great “despite,” the thumb in the eye to paralyzing despair.

The Christmas story is joyful in the heart of its message. In the darkness of Roman oppression that prevailed in Jesus’ time; in the poverty of a stable because there was no room for a poor family in Bethlehem; in a feed trough for animals; surrounded by the poorest of the poor, shepherds whose homes were caves around Bethlehem; in these unlikely and extremely depressing circumstances, a child is born who will change the world and transform our lives. The manger, the stable, the shepherds, the animals—all these are not the makings of a romantic crèche scene. These are cold, harsh realities. They are the real world. And it is in the midst of the real world that love is born, and we are called to rejoice. Joy doesn’t come into this world pretending that the real world doesn’t exist, or that it can be prettied up. Joy embraces the real, defiantly laughs and says, “Despite!” So the first hallmark of joy is that it doesn’t seek escape from the real world; it embraces it and defies the power of evil that often seems to be in control of it.

And Christmas joy springs from the transformation that love brings. Joy changes us, unlike the pleasure that indulges us as we are. Last week, we talked about John the Baptist and his message of repentance. If we are to experience the joy that the incarnation, God With Us, should bring to us, we have to have that change of heart. We have to be different because Jesus has entered our lives. We have to allow Jesus to change us. Happiness has to do with maximizing what we are; joy has to do with transformation of who we are. So the second hallmark of joy is repentance, change, transformation.

And joy, once it enters our lives, can't keep to itself. Even though joy is intensely personal, it can never be an entirely private experience. The poet Anne Sexton put it this way, "The joy that isn't shared, I've heard, dies young." When Paul says to the Philippians, "Rejoice! Again I say, 'rejoice,'" he follows with, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

The Lord is near. Rejoice! Embrace the world with a defiant "despite." Repent and become a new person. Make your gentleness and your joy be known to everyone. Again I say, "Rejoice!" Amen.