

The traditional name for today is Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for 'rejoice,' and you can see the theme in the readings from Isaiah and Thessalonians, as well as Psalm 126. The third candle on our Advent wreath is the candle of joy. We're coming close now to the Christmas celebration, so joy is on our minds. And if you're not feeling particularly joyful, don't worry. There's a solution to all your worries. All you have to do is go to Sears. Yes, Sears, where there are signs hanging throughout each store declaring "Real Joy Guaranteed."

OK, to be fair, they're trying to make customers happy with a nice list of promises: guaranteed lowest prices, a liberal return policy, free shipping if your desired item isn't in stock. And that's great; I happen to like Sears, and I'm all for a return to good customer service. But real joy? Guaranteed? On this Gaudete Sunday, can we say what our sources of real joy are? On what guarantees do we rest?

For Leymah Gbowee, real joy was not shopping at Sears, rather it was the end of civil war in her native Liberia. Gbowee, along with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (also of Liberia) and Tawakkul Karman (of Yemen), was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October. In her memoir called *Mighty Be Our Powers*, Gbowee describes how one night, sleeping on her office floor, she had a dream. "I didn't know where I was. Everything was dark. I couldn't see a face, but I heard a voice, and it was talking to me, commanding me: 'Gather the women to pray for peace!'" At 5 am she woke up shaking, believing she had heard the voice of God.

Peace was a faint hope for Liberians after fourteen years of a savage civil war. By some estimates, ten percent of the population had been killed. Twenty-five percent had fled the country. Under dictator Charles Taylor, cocaine-fueled child soldiers traumatized the nation. Torture, mutilation, systematic rape, starvation kept the population in fear. Schools and hospitals were all closed. Unburied dead lay in the streets. There was no water, no electricity, no phone service.

It was in the midst of this suffering that Leymah Gbowee had her dream. And later that morning she also told it to the women at her Lutheran church. Sister Esther, an evangelist, led them in prayer: "Dear God, thank you for sending us this vision. Give us your blessing and offer us Your protection and guidance in helping us to understand what it means." What it meant was the beginning of the Liberian women's peace movement that ended the civil war.

About twenty Lutheran women began to gather every Tuesday at noon to pray. They invited other Christian churches to join in. At one meeting a woman spoke up, "I'm the only Muslim here, and we want to join this peace movement." The Christian women shouted "Praise the Lord!" and formed an alliance with the Muslim women. They shared their stories and created training sessions and workshops. They passed out brochures and marched to city hall. Three days a week for six months they went to the mosques, the markets, and the churches of Monrovia, shouting: "Liberian women, awake for peace!" They pressured Charles Taylor into peace talks in Ghana, and then in Ghana they barricaded the men in the meeting room until they signed peace accords. After the 2003 accords, they were instrumental in disarming the country, registering voters, and electing Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2005 as the first woman head of state in Africa, where she is still serving.

This extraordinary story and this extraordinary movement is a modern-day illustration of the sentiments expressed in the psalm we just sang: “Those who sow their seeds in tears, reap in joy throughout the years.” These women sowed bitter tears. They went out weeping. But as the Psalmist sang, “Mouths that once were parched with anguish, now with shouts of joy are filled.” Real joy.

No one would be naïve to think that there are no more challenges to be dealt with in Liberia – or in any other place that has suffered devastation. Think of the long-term project of rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, or Japan after the earthquake and tsunami last year. The psalmist isn't naïve either. He or she does not ignore the brutal realities of the human condition. The song is based on national disaster and lost fortunes; it laments people who had been deported into captivity and now have returned to new problems. Isaiah similarly speaks of ruined cities and national grief, but also prophesies about a time when gladness will overtake despair. And in the gospel, John acknowledges the darkness of the world, but celebrates the light that darkness cannot overcome.

So when we talk about real joy, we're talking about joy in the midst of difficult and challenging circumstances. We enter into this third week of Advent knowing full well the problems of our own time: economic disasters around the world, threats from global warming, war and the seeds of war. Here at home: a broken health care system, a torn safety net, crumbling infrastructure, ruined cities. Unemployment or the threat of unemployment, foreclosure, crushing debt, if not at our own doors, then close by.

The world around us tells us to be joyful in this season. Sears proclaims that it can guarantee real joy. But also all around us are those who carry heavy burdens of grief, depression, loss, illness, and financial worries - the painful places in the human heart. Relationships that are strained or severed, addictions that are hidden, violence, self-loathing, greed, acting out, hatred, fear – all made even more acute by the culture's demand for merriment.

This Advent, I think of the parents of Hiram Lawrence, the 23-month-old boy who was shot in the head two weeks ago in Oakland and taken off of life support Friday. Not even Sears can guarantee joy in that home this Christmas.

This Advent, I think of the growing number of homeless families here in San Francisco. I think of already overworked and underpaid teachers who are having to figure out how to teach kids who haven't had a good night's sleep or a decent meal or a quiet place to do homework. This Advent I think of all the 'Season of Sharing' stories that raise money for those in need – a worthy endeavor, but a teeny, tiny dent in our systemic economic train wreck. In so many ways we are like the people of Isaiah's and the Psalmist's time. There are systems and practices and attitudes that keep people down if not captive, trapped in poverty, hunger, disease, and war.

By now, you must be thinking: wasn't this supposed to be Joy Sunday? Where's the joy in all this suffering? Again we have to go back to the promise of the psalm: “Those who sow their seeds in tears, reap in joy throughout the years.” But of course we have to ask “How does that work?”

It would be wonderful if it was as simple as going to a department store for a guaranteed relief from suffering. Sears may be able to offer a lovely list of customer services, but the truth is that real joy takes seriously the human condition in all its messiness. As someone said: "This is no jingle-bells joy brought with a swipe of a credit card." The mystery of suffering that turns to joy is glimpsed in Psalm 126. The power of God that turns tiny seeds into grain is an amazing miracle in itself.

But the Psalmist makes an even more astounding claim. There are seeds that are not ordinary seeds, but seeds of sorrow. And what these seeds bear is not grain or wheat, but shouts of joy. The seeds of this joy have been planted in sadness and watered with tears.

I was reading the paper this morning (“I read the news today, O boy!”) and of course it was all bad. And even as I was still working on this sermon, I began to get caught in the despair of the world. But then I opened up my email and found a message from *The Advent Door*, a wonderful devotional website. Jan Richardson spoke to what I was attempting to articulate: “The rejoicing that the psalmist writes of is not so much a natural disposition as it is a practice, a habit, a way of being that does not depend solely on external events. This rejoicing does not involve ignoring the pain that is present in the world. It means, rather, seeing the world as it is, in all its beauty and its brokenness. It means choosing to resist being overwhelmed by the brokenness; recognizing and celebrating the presence of beauty and relationship; and developing a capacity for hope and working toward what we hope for—and what God hopes for in and through us.”

When Jesus began his ministry, he went to the synagogue and took out this scroll from the prophet Isaiah, and read these elegant and hope-filled words of promise: “The spirit of God is upon me.” That is why we read Isaiah's words during this season of hope, and on this Sunday of joy, Gaudete Sunday. Jesus' ministry of healing and preaching and liberation became the sign of God's coming into the world in a new and definitive way. And this spirit continues within us, in every act of justice and rebuilding, healing and hope. Just ask Leymah Gbowee.

Amen

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

God's justice was a constant theme of the great prophets of Israel. In these lines of poetry from the unknown prophet of Israel's exile in Babylon, this theme applied to the promised return of the exiles to their homeland about 539 BC. Not only would the ruined cities of Judea be rebuilt, but the ancient covenant between Israel and God would be renewed. The end result would be a whole new quality of life for God's people. More than six centuries later, Jesus adopted the first verse of this passage as the basic theme for his ministry.

It is written . . .

The spirit of God is upon me,
because YHWH has anointed me:
God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of favor from YHWH,
and the day of God's vindication;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion —
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of tears,
the mantle of praise instead of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
planted by YHWH to display God's glory.
They will restore the ancient ruins,
and rebuild sites long devastated;
they will repair the ruined cities,
neglected for many generations.

For I, YHWH, love justice,
I hate robbery and sin;
So I will faithfully compensate you,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with you.
Your descendants will be renowned among the nations,
and your offspring among the people;
all who see you will acknowledge
that you are a people blessed by YHWH.

I will greatly rejoice in YHWH,
who is the joy of my soul!
My God has clothed me with a robe of deliverance,
and wrapped me in a mantle of justice,
the way a bridegroom puts on a turban,
and a bride bedecks herself with jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden brings its seeds to blossom,
so YHWH makes justice sprout,
and praise spring up before all nations.

Psalm 126

This was another of the songs that might have been sung by pilgrims making their way up to the temple in Jerusalem. It celebrated Israel's deliverance from the Babylonian captivity.

It is written . . .

When God restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"God has done great things for them."
God has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O God,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,

shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

These words connect communal and personal transformation with spiritual practices. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances....do not quench the Spirit...listen to the prophets...but ask questions and be discerning...seek good and not evil." We are to act as citizens of God's realm even before our world has been transformed. We are to be harbingers of spiritual transformation. An eschatological ethic, living moment by moment with hope of God's coming realm, joins the journey inward and the journey outward. Our contemplations lead to actions, and our actions enable us to see the world through Christ's eyes.

It is written . . .

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not stifle the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything and accept only what is good. Avoid any semblance of evil.

May the God of peace make you perfect in holiness. May you be preserved whole and complete - spirit and soul and body – irreproachable at the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ. The One who calls us is trustworthy: God will do this.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

John's Gospel contains no story about the birth of Jesus. The introductory paragraphs set that event in a cosmic context using metaphors such as life, light, glory and truth to describe God's full revelation in Jesus, the Word made flesh. Then the focus shifts to John the Baptist's ministry to prepare the way for Jesus, the Light of the world. John distinguished himself from Jesus as the one who is only a witness to the light. He thus set the stage for Jesus' appearance by reiterating this distinction when challenged by the religious leaders of Israel.

It is written . . .

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John, who came as a witness to testify about the Light, so that through his testimony all might believe. He himself was not the Light; but he came to testify about the Light – the true Light that illumines all humankind.

Now the Temple authorities sent emissaries from Jerusalem - priests and Levites - to talk to John.

"Who are you?" they asked.

This is John's testimony: he didn't refuse to answer, but freely admitted, "I am not the Messiah."

"Who are you then?" they asked. "Elijah?"

"No, I am not," he answered.

"Are you the Prophet?"

"No," he replied.

Finally they said to him, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say for yourself?"

John said, "I am," as Isaiah prophesied, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of our God!'"

The emissaries were members of the Pharisee sect. They questioned him further: "If you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, then why are you baptizing people?"

John said, "I baptize with water because among you stands one whom you do not recognize - the One who is to come after me - the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy even to untie."

This took place in Bethany, across the Jordan River, where John was baptizing