

In the old comic strip CALVIN AND HOBBS, little Suzy is walking to the mailbox. In her hand is her letter to Santa Claus. Out of the corner of her eye she sees her arch-enemy, 6-year-old Calvin, ready to hurl a big, fat snowball right at her. "I see you, Calvin," Suzy warns, "and you'd better not throw that snowball! I'm mailing a letter to Santa right now." "Is the envelope already sealed?" Calvin shouts back, the snowball, in his mittened hand, set for launch. "Yes. But I could write a PS on the back." "So you have a pen?" "As a matter of fact, I do." The chastened Calvin sadly drops the snowball as the triumphant Suzy walks away. "I bet she's bluffing," Calvin mumbles, "But this isn't the time of year to tempt fate." (Dec 9, 1995)

First some biblical background. As we do almost every Sunday, we are looking back into the historical scriptures of Israel and the church, from both the Old and New Testaments. And yet, we look back in order to look forward. These texts confront us – and invite us into conversation. They give us the insights we need to deal with present realities and future fears.

And as we draw closer to Christmas, we are met by the prophet Isaiah – Jesus' favorite prophet – and by the disciples of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus.

In chapter 35 of Isaiah, we are given a view into the future. Where does God meet us? In the wilderness. Where there is wildness and trackless waste, there God comes. Wilderness – midbar in Hebrew – has multiple meanings in the Old Testament. While the Hebrew slaves fled to the wilderness (Ex 3:13), it is also a frightening place of wild animals (Dt 8:15) where there is little life-giving water (Ex 15, 17). The wilderness is deadly (Ex 14:3) and wide (Dt 1:19). Yet wilderness is also where Israel learned to trust God's providential care with manna and quail and water from the rock. (Dt 1:3; Ex 16; Ex 17). What will God's people learn in the wilderness? That God sustains them (Dt 32).

Therefore, in the wilderness is joy – mentioned so prominently in Isaiah's opening verses. Even in a dry, desolate place, there can be joy because God is there. Even in the desert there is a profusion of blooms, fresh growth, and fruitfulness. When God comes, the desert becomes a place of fruitful splendor. Seeing this stunning vision of the future makes us strong in the present, strengthens our weak hands and knees (35:3). For those who are anxious, the prophet tells us to be strong and not to fear because God is among us as our God (35:4a). We can hope for the future because our God comes, our God saves (35:4b). When God comes, eyes will be opened, ears will now hear, the silent will shout. Streams of water will gush forth in the desert (35:5-6).

And in this Sunday's Gospel, Matthew presents us with a curious encounter between the disciples of John the Baptist and Jesus. Just last Sunday, we heard John's preaching and his hope that the coming Messiah would come, turn things upside down, and set things right between God's people and God (Mt 3:11-12). John's message was strong, hopeful, and intense.

But that hopefulness seems a long way from John's words now. John is in jail. Why, if John's hopeful words were true, is he in jail? The questions seem to arise, not out of belief, but from doubt, doubt that arises from the present dire circumstances. If Jesus is God's Messiah, God's answer to what's wrong with the world, the promised redeemer come among us, then why does the world look so unredeemed? The Romans were still in power, there was no move to unseat the oppressors, to say nothing about the continuing presence of sin, death, and injustice.

Someone said to me a while back at a cocktail party, "I've given up belief in an interventionist God." I really did not want to get into a big theological conversation over the cheese and crackers, and I really wanted

a glass of wine. But I could have said to him, “Well, if there is no prospect of there being an interventionist God, then there’s no real hope for the future. Our hope in life, in life beyond life, in the present moment or in the future is that God not only cares but that God also comes, helps, hopes, acts and intervenes.”

“It’s a small thing to say that ‘God is love,’” said John Wesley. “The wondrous thing is that God is love pro nobis.” God is love FOR US. This is the message of Advent. GOD IS COMING. He is FOR us. And therein lies our hope. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2022, p. 33-34)

Second, a word on hope. Here is a wonderful little piece by Rubem Alves. “What is hope? It is a presentiment that imagination is more real and reality less real than it looks. It is a hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts that oppress and repress is not the last word. It is a suspicion that reality is more complex than realism wants us to believe, and that the frontiers of the possible are not determined by the limits of the actual, and that in a miraculous and unexpected way life is preparing the creative events which will open the way to freedom and resurrection. The two, suffering and hope, live from each other. Suffering without hope produces resentment and despair. Hope without suffering creates illusions and naivete.

And so we plant date trees even though those who plant them will never eat from them. We must live by the love of what we will never see. This is a sacred discipline. It is a refusal to let the creative act be dissolved in the immediate, and a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren. Such a disciplined love is what has given the prophets, revolutionaries and saints the courage to die for the future they envisaged. They make their own bodies the seed of their highest hope. (from TOMORROW’S CHILD, quoted in an article by Goergen)

It’s like a story that a Lutheran Pastor named Reuben Youngdahl tells. It is about a young man whom he met while visiting in Dublin one summer. Youngdahl noticed this young man had on the desk in his study, a plaque with 2 words on it. The words were “But God.” Pastor Youngdahl was so impressed by this plaque that he had one made just like it for his own desk.

Visitors to his office would ask him, ‘What do you mean by those 2 words – “but God”?’

He explained that in his hour of deepest need, he had learned to say, “But God....will help.” In a moment of utter despair, he could say, “But God....will give me hope.” In a moment of loneliness, he could say, “But God....is with me.” When he felt insignificant and unwanted, it would help to repeat “But God.....loves me.”

“That always turned the scale from despair to hope, from defeat to victory, from sin to salvation,” he reported. “But God.....but God....but God.....”

Hope is not blind optimism that everything is simply going to work out all right. Hope is based in faith – and such faith recognizes that life can often be hard – sometimes brutally hard – but if we maintain our faith, and if we will persist and not give up, God will come through for us. As long as there is hope – hope in Christ – life is worth living. The late Emil Brunner once said, “What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life.” And he was right. Really, a hope-filled life is the only life worth living. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2020, p. 16) Despite all the evidence to the contrary.

And this presence of hope is what makes joy – true, biblical joy – possible. And so my third point. Evangelist Billy Sunday saw the need for a joyful faith when he made this observation about so many of the churches of his time. “The trouble with many people is that they have got just enough religion to make them

miserable. If there is no joy in religion, you have a leak in your religion.” (LECTIONAID, Vol 11, #3, p. 1) In the novel EAST OF EDEN, Samuel is married to “his tiny Irish wife, a tight hard little woman, humorless as a chicken. She had a dour Presbyterian mind and a code of morals that pinned down and beat the brains out of nearly everything that was pleasant to do.” Ever meet someone like that? Humorless as a chicken?! H.L. Mencken, the American newspaper editor, defined Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” (ALIVE IN GOD, Timothy Radcliffe, p. 121-122)

But we have to admit that our faith does not prevent hardship, heartbreak, sickness, and pain. Archbishop Desmond Tutu – no stranger to all of that and more in apartheid in South Africa, said that as we deepen our faith and joy, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without becoming broken. (adapted from THE BOOK OF JOY, Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, p. 12)

In a homily Deacon Rich gave this past Friday on joy, he mentioned that in our broken and divided supposedly UNITED States, we as Catholics should be the people known for our joy, and bringing hope to the seemingly hopeless divisions in our country and world. Wouldn't that be something for folks to notice about us as being Catholic? That we are joyful. He also mentioned that Pope Francis said joy is a tool for sharing the gospel; people are drawn to joy and joyful people.

All of the saints have been known for their joy. It flows from their closeness to God and from the perspective on life that faith brought them. Typically, they have also lived out their heartfelt desire to follow God, and so they have found joy. St. Katharine Drexel, a 20th century Philadelphia heiress who gave away a fortune to start a religious order that would serve blacks and Native Americans, said “Please don't say that some great sorrow drove me into the convent. That's nonsense. I am, and have always been, one of the happiest women in the world.”

If we read the lives of the saints we find someone blessed with a zestful spirit. Even those saints traditionally thought to have been overly pious are often revealed to have had a surprising joie de vivre.

St. Ignatius Loyola, often described as an austere ascetic, used to cheer up sad Jesuits by spontaneously performing dances from the Basque country in Spain, his homeland. St. Bernadette Soubirous (no relation to the car company – you get that free!) – was the famous 19th century visionary whose apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Lourdes inspired the book and the movie THE SONG OF BERNADETTE, is typically portrayed in both statue and portrait as grim-faced. Perhaps because of the conventions of her time, even the photographs show her as an unsmiling prude. But biographies of the former shepherdess reveal a charming, down-to-earth woman with a delightful sense of humor. Toward the end of her life, suffering from a fatal illness, she took to embroidery, favoring heart-shaped patterns. One day, she joked with one of the sisters in her convent, “If anyone tells you I don't have a heart, tell them I make them all day long!” (James Martin, BETWEEN HEAVEN AND MIRTH, p. 70)

And lastly, a more whimsical look at saints and joy. Paul Murray, a Dominican priest, wrote a book called THE NEW WINE OF DOMINICAN SPIRITUALITY: A DRINK CALLED HAPPINESS. In it he shows that the early brothers and sisters often spoke of the gospel as ‘the new wine.’ In preaching, the barrel is breached, we get a little drunk with the Gospel and the party begins. I don't think anyone has ever gotten drunk listening to my preaching – but I don't doubt that some have wanted to TAKE A DRINK after they have suffered through my 3 points. Just saying! Jordan of Saxony, who was St. Dominic's successor, called the Gospel ‘the wine of hope,’ the good wine, which puts us at ease, gifts us a lift and makes us happy. St. Dominic's most famous

miracle echoes Jesus' first miracle of water into wine at Cana. Dominic came to a convent late at night, woke up the nuns, and preached to them. Sometimes, I've had to wake people up when I preach because they have fallen asleep; they don't like it! But when Dominic finished, he said: "It would be good to have something to drink." You know, Dominic might be on to something about raising Church attendance! Homilies and wine or beer! But at that convent that night, the cup of wine was passed around and never emptied as Dominic urged them to drink up! The Dominicans obviously delighted in their wine. An early General Chapter ruled that if they drink too much wine after Compline (night prayer), they must pray it again!

And I end with words attributed to St. Brigid of Kildare, also a Dominican, which reflects a more Irish taste for celebration: I should like a great lake of beer for the King of Kings. I should like the angels of heaven to be drinking it through time eternal. (adapted from Timothy Radcliffe, *ALIVE IN GOD: A CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION*, p. 114-115)

Be joyful! SALUT! CIN CIN! PROST! CHEERS! AMEN!