

History tells us that the advent wreath has been with us since 1839 when a German Lutheran pastor designed a wreath atop a cartwheel for a children's mission. That first wreath contained twenty-eight candles which ushered the children through four weeks to Christmas day. Twenty-four of the candles were small tapers to be lit, one added each day, while the four larger candles were reserved for Sundays. Over the centuries the tapers have disappeared, and the candles were given colours and particular attributes.

God bless my wife Victoria who this year insisted that we have a version of this wreath on our dining room table and that we light the Sunday candles in the presence of our grandchildren. This simple ritual has given us an occasion to talk about Jesus, but even more, about the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. The first week seemed easy as we talked about our hopes. The children hoped for a world with no war and fun times at Christmas while the adults doubled down on hope for harmony in the world. Peace was a bit more challenging. I stated the obvious – that peace was a world without war, but Victoria countered that peace had to be more than the absence of conflict. It led me to think about the Jewish word 'shalom' which describes a life marked by equality and justice for everyone. This discussion could have left the children out, but they seemed to

understand the feeling of peace that arose in good family times when sibling rivalries were quiet.

Tonight, we are to light the 'Joy' candle and this morning I have been invited to preach on this, the 'Joy' Sunday of advent. I have spent the week pondering. What does one say about joy? What is joy? When have I experienced joy? When have you? I bought a book, consulted friends, and scanned the internet in an attempt to understand 'Joy'. At first blush joy seemed so obvious. A glass of wine with a friend, a day at the lake, a January escape from winter. Is joy simply a synonym for being happy? I quickly realized that happiness is transitory. The friend had to cancel our get together, there can be rainy days at the lake, and Covid quickly confounded travel plans. Happiness can be illusive, but joy persists. My mother has long since died but the memory of her endures as a source of joy. Day by day marriages have their ups and downs but after 47 years there is joy in the constancy of living with my very best friend. There are days when I struggle to understand the reality of God, but when I pause to pray before sleep, there is deep joy in knowing that there is One who listens.

It appeared that even the dictionary is confused about joy. One definition suggests that joy is an emotion brought about through 'success'

and 'possessing what one desires.' Another definition suggests that joy is a 'deep abiding' and an 'orientation of the heart'. I vote for the latter.

The scripture lesson we heard today is known as the Magnificat. It is attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus, whose heart, filled with joy, sings a song which begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour." Most of what we call the Christmas stories of the Bible have to be categorized as legend – a fragment of truth surrounded by some theology and a lot of embellishment. I guess it is possible that Mary sang this song in the presence of her cousin Elizabeth who immediately wrote it down. It is more likely that the gospel writer named Luke heard stories about Jesus' mother and, as he reflected upon her life, he composed a song to place upon her lips.

Regardless of which explanation you prefer this song of joy is pretty remarkable. Mary, an adolescent is pregnant with a child. It is likely that she lived in near poverty and tradition tells us she is to be married to a man much older than herself. Cattle stall or not, the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth were surely very modest. Mary watches her son grow and perhaps marvels at his wisdom. She follows him around and sees the hope and healing he inspires in the crowds. Perhaps she is amazed, perhaps she is proud, perhaps she is worried. He draws the attention of

the authorities, and we know how it ends. It is said that Mary is there on the day of his death, and she surely hears the reports that arise on that first Easter morning. Whatever stories Luke has heard about Mary, it causes him to write her a song of joy. He considers the amazement and desperation of Jesus' birth; the confusion and pride she must feel over his life; the grief of his death and the hope-filled rumours that follow and concludes that Mary would sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices (that is, my spirit knows joy)." A mother's love. It is the orientation of her heart. There is a deep abiding. Nothing, not even death, can erase her joy – it is eternal.

Something about joy makes me think of Indigenous people. My modest knowledge of Indigenous persons arose during the years that we worked together in the Spiritual Care Department of the Health Region. I have spoken of my colleague Ron on other occasions. Ron was an unrepentant smoker. He would frequently exit a meeting explaining that he needed to take a 'health break'; or, if it was at a pious gathering, he explained he needed a 'holy smoke'. One day he took me out to harvest sage for the smudge and warned me to be on the look out for a roving coyote. He waited until I was anxiously surveying the horizon only to laugh and utter his familiar line: 'just kidding'. Despite the traumas Ron had

experienced, despite being subjected to jail time and frequent racism, humour was an expression of the joy that abided in Ron. Stephanie Pangowish, an Indigenous comedian, observed how pervasive humour was in her family. ‘There was always a joke,’ she explained, ‘whether that was in ceremony, at the bingo hall, or even during a funeral.’ She concludes: ‘Laughter firewalled us from colonial violence.’ It was my humble observation that joy erupted spontaneously amongst indigenous people and was testimony that even when life conspires to thwart happiness, joy can endure.

One scholar I consulted on joy referred me to the Biblical story of Jacob. You might recall that a formative experience in Jacob’s life was an all night dream in which he wrestled with a stranger. Upon waking he realized that the stranger in the dream was God’s messenger calling him into a deeper relationship with the Holy One. Furthermore, the story tells us that as a result of this wrestling, Jacob was left with a persistent limp. The scholar tells us that joy, maybe especially the joy of knowing God can arise out of moments of brokenness, when it seems that God alone is at our side. I don’t believe that one needs to be wounded in order to know joy, but sometimes our wounds lead us to a deeper joy. The death of a

loved one can produce one of life's most difficult wounds yet the memories that remain are often the source of an abiding joy.

As I pondered joy this week a familiar story kept coming back to me. It is a story that I first read in high school and one which I have indulged from time to time over the years. It is likely that you also know this story entitled The Gift of the Magi, authored by the writer whose pen name is O. Henry. In the story we meet a young couple, Jim and Della, who have recently married and are much in love. They want to give a precious gift to one another at Christmas. The dilemma they face is that they are dreadfully short of money, barely enough to meet their monthly expenses with none left over for buying presents. Unknown to one another, they each devise a plan to acquire a gift. Della is known for her beautiful hair, auburn in colour and extending down to her waist. She has spent a lifetime growing it and knows that it could be sold for cash. She has it cut and takes the money to buy a chain for the cherished pocket watch which Jim inherited from his father. She knows Jim will be delighted by her gift which makes the sacrifice of her hair more bearable.

Meanwhile, across town, Jim is agonizing over how to afford a gift for his wife. He has found the perfect gift for her – a tortoise shell comb that would look so lovely in her hair. He is determined to purchase it and

decides the time has come to pawn his father's watch so that he might obtain the comb for Della. As they come together on Christmas Eve ready to gift one another they are confronted by the sacrifice which each has made for the other, which makes their material gifts seem extraneous. The happiness of a special present is overshadowed by the orientation of their hearts which reveals a deep and abiding joy of the love they share.

You may have heard of, or even read, the book I purchased to further my understanding of joy. It is entitled Surprised by Joy and was written by the early twentieth century Christian writer C. S. Lewis. It was a struggle to read this book as it is written in a scholarly and classical style. I hoped for an easy understanding of joy and a 'quotable quote' with which I could summarize today's sermon. Alas, I did not find that, but I did salvage a few lines that deepened my understanding of joy. Lewis suggests that *joy is a by-product of living, a thing that is often only recognized after the fact*. Joy is a by-product of living, a thing that is often only recognized after the fact. In the midst of living I didn't always notice the devotion of my mother, the blessings of my marriage, or the constancy of God. Yet when I paused to consider joy it is these things that remain in my heart. Long since gone are the places I have visited or the trinkets I have accumulated.

I imagine that a real-life Jim and Della would some day laugh as they told their children about Della's short hair and Jim's watch-less fob. Yet this bitter-sweet moment was a reflection of a deep, deep joy that they found in one another and sustained them through a lifetime.

C. S. Lewis offered up one other thought that does lead to the end of this sermon. He wrote: "I have often frightened away joy by wanting to snare it." Perhaps I have tried to 'snare' joy this morning so I could present it neatly packaged for you. I have not been able to do that, but I hope that sometime today you will find a candle, alone or in a wreath, pink or white – it really doesn't matter – and that you'll light the candle and ponder the sources of joy you have experienced in your life. And after that moment of pause and prayer perhaps you might sing the words of Mary's song, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God." Amen.