

Joy (Part One)

“Rejoice in the Lord always”

Reflection 21 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Our series on “A New World in the Morning” arises in part out of the recognition that many people no longer go to church. There are many reasons for this, but one is that they come to many churches and hear only bad news. They hear of a God outraged by their sins, and they hear views of the cross that accentuate the anger of God and not God’s love. They hear of a story that ends horrifically with hundreds of millions of people suffering excruciating pain forever and forever in the fires of Hell. And so much the worse if they’ve ever had an abortion or if their sexual orientation doesn’t line up “with the ruling class.” And so they leave church feeling depressed, guilty and ashamed. Their spirits are battered. They don’t come back. They’re afraid of being hurt further.

What they’re looking for of course is good news, a sense of forgiveness, meaning, purpose, direction in life, a mission, a way to lighten up, a way to get unstuck from all the ways life can trap us. What they are looking for, it turns out, is what Jesus came – and what Jesus comes – offering, and that is joy, that deep smile in the soul that tells us all is well and all shall be well whatever we face.

So Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4-6). And you may remember what Paul is going through as he writes this text, that he’s under arrest in Rome, that he awaits trial before Caesar, that that Caesar is Nero, that a friend he deeply cared about had almost died, that people very close to him are arguing, that some seek to undermine Paul’s preaching, that some preach Jesus out of selfish ambition, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ, that Paul is being “poured out like a drinking offering” (2:17). Paul knows all these things and yet he writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” And then he goes on: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” – this peace that comes from knowing that in God we live and move and have our being, that God is always with us, within us and all around, that as we empty ourselves God fills us, and that in all things God is working for our good.

The truth is that we worship a fabulously joyful God. Do you remember what Abraham named his boy? “Isaac” which means “He laughs,” because as Sarah now a mother in her old age said, “God has brought me laughter” (Genesis 21:1-7). And so we hear the texts of terror in Scripture, the stories of the Flood, of Nadab and Abihu, of Uzzah touching the Ark of the Covenant and being struck dead, but what about the other stories – the stories of an exuberantly joyful God? Creating the universe out of nothing. Designing the pleasure garden of Eden. Taking a slave people in Egypt and making from them a great nation. Being asked for his name, simply saying, “I AM sent you.” Here’s one for you – stopping the sun for Joshua! Giving Gideon and his band of 300 victory over hundreds of thousands. Choosing from the strong sons of Jesse in the little village of Bethlehem the youngest one to be king. Opening eyes so that one could see the hillsides full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. Hear the laughter of God: casting the runaway Jonah into the belly of a great fish, and then spitting him up on dry land; bringing Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego safely through the fiery furnace; stopping the mouths of

hungry lions when Daniel lands in the middle of them. Can you hear God confiding to this heavenly court, “They still think I can’t do these things?” Do you see all the cosmic humor? Can you hear the laughter? Can you sense the fabulous joy of our God? From where, or rather from whom, do you suppose we got our humor, even our impishness, from? Or consider Jesus who could be a lot of fun at a wedding party, who would turn water into wine, who loved little children, who was called by his critics a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11:19), who scandalized respectable people by being a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:9-13).

In fact, we are wired for joy. Much of our life is a quest for the joy we are meant to have. Too often though we look for it in all the wrong places: in the buzz of a cocktail hour, in the momentary pleasure of feeling superior to others, in humor at the expense of others, in that briefest of celebrations after a game, in the expensive thrills of exotic places, in having what it is not ours to have. As C.S. Lewis noted in his sermon “The Weight of Glory:” “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” When infinite joy is offered us!

Here’s the joy I want. Let’s go back to Paul’s first days in Philippi (as recorded in Acts 16) – how he and Silas had ended up in jail one night. They’d healed a slave girl, freed her of an evil spirit by which she had foretold people’s fortunes, and thereby cut into her owners’ hope of making more money off her. The owners had complained to the magistrates, and Paul and Silas are stripped, severely flogged, and thrown into the back cell of the city jail with their feet fastened in stocks. So night falls, and there Paul and Silas are in jail, in a strange city, languishing. Languishing? No. The other prisoners hear in the dark from the back of the prison talking and then – is it singing? It’s around midnight. It’s been dark for hours now. And Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners are listening, more astonished than annoyed. Here are men – in darkness you could feel, their legs locked in stocks, beaten, battered, caked in blood – singing!

Just what is it that has Paul and Silas in prison at midnight singing? Then, just then, the earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open and everyone’s chains fall off. The jailer wakes and sees that the doors are open and he’s horrified. He’s probably a crusty old ex-soldier and he knows what happens to jailers whose prisoners escape. He looks into the darkness and at first sees nothing. And he draws his sword to end his own life. But from deep in the prison a voice rings out, Paul’s, “Don’t do it. We’re all here [just singing].” “We’re all here.” It says a lot for the moral authority of Paul and Silas that their fellow prisoners stayed too. In any case, the jailer can’t believe it. He falls trembling before them and asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And he and his family were baptized.

It’s an extraordinary story, with layers of meaning and insight. But the one that most interests me is this: Where does one find the faith, the jazz, the joy, to sing songs in the cold and dark of a prison at midnight? Is there any way you can imagine yourself doing this? I for one am thrown off by a lot less than this.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.

