

Joy Hinges on One Word

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
December 17, 2017

Today's Advent candle is the candle of Joy. Joy is one of those words that has a peculiar meaning for the Christian faith. Many people liken joy to happiness, but that's not really accurate. Happiness is more circumstantial in nature, whereas joy is based not in our circumstances but in our relationship with God and our knowledge that God is with us and is in control. To be sure, joyful people are often happy people, but happiness and joy aren't the same thing. Because joy arises from our relationship with God, people can be joyful even in the midst of sadness or difficult times.

In this morning's lesson from Isaiah, the theme of joy bursts forth in the 10th verse: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God." It is a spirit of rejoicing that, in my opinion, hinges on one critical word repeated several times in this morning's scripture lesson: instead. "Instead" is one of the most profound words any of us can have in our theological vocabulary.

"Instead" means that where something once was, there is now something else, something different. It means something of a replacement, or an alternative given to us. "Instead" is a word that provides the basis for hope. It means that God has plans for you. It means that God is not content with the way things are, that God is not satisfied with the status quo. "Instead" is a word that conveys that God has something more in mind.

God has always declared that his plan and his purpose is that the world will not always be the way it is, that there is something much better that awaits us. Here in Isaiah, the Lord promises to bestow upon his people "a crown of beauty *instead* of ashes, the oil of gladness *instead* of mourning, and a garment of praise *instead* of a spirit of despair." "*Instead* of their shame," he says, "my people will receive a double portion, and *instead* of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance..."¹

Instead. That's God word to us at Advent and throughout the year. *Instead* of despair, we are offered hope. *Instead* of enmity and hatred, we are met with love. *Instead* of captivity to sin, we are given freedom to serve Christ. *Instead* of fear we are offered peace that passes understanding. *Instead* of condemnation,

¹ Isaiah 61:3, 7

we are offered salvation.

Instead. It's God's word to us. It's the word we shared a little over a week ago, as the 14 boys from Tara Hall and their staff members joined us for dinner and a celebration of Christmas. The boys at Tara Hall are from broken homes, families that are unable to provide for them, or families that are unable to control the behavior of the boys. At Tara Hall, they are given shelter, and structure, and discipline, and education. And they are loved. They are shown a wonderful "instead." Instead of a life that will lead to nowhere but trouble, they are given a chance at a life built on a foundation of love and respect and growth into maturity.

When we gave the presents to the boys, we asked each one to tell us what grade they are in, and what it is they like most about Tara Hall. When they told what they liked most about Tara Hall, most of the answers were fairly superficial: the gym, or going fishing, or the game room. But one boy stood up straight and said, "What I like about Tara Hall is that it gives me a second chance."

He got it, didn't he? Hit the nail on the head.

Instead.

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God."

Friends, we are able to rejoice—even in the midst of turmoil and trouble and trials—because God offers us an alternate vision of the future: The way things are isn't the way they will always be. God has an "instead" for us.

But we cannot relegate the conditions of the "instead" to eternity. Certainly, when the Lord comes in glory, we will experience this great "instead" of God in ways beyond our imagination. But as people who have experienced the transforming love of Christ in our hearts, and as people who call Jesus our "Lord," we have the obligation to pursue the conditions of the "instead" today. It is not consistent with our Savior if we turn our backs on the poor, the oppressed, the captives, the sick – all of those whom would be considered "the least of these. We don't have permission to ignore the plight of the vulnerable ones, nor can we simply tell them that "it will all be ok in the end, that God has something great" in store for them. It's not okay to say that "all will be well in eternity, so just endure your trials and troubles the best you can."

It's because the people of God at Georgetown Presbyterian Church knew that our Lord intends us to pursue justice and relief for the poor, the hungry, the homeless in the present time, that men and women of this congregation started ministries like Helping Hands and Habitat for Humanity in this community; it's also why so many of you remain so actively involved in those ministries today. It's because the people of God at Georgetown Presbyterian Church know that

our Lord intends for there to be an “instead” for the Hispanic children of this community today, that we host them two days every week for tutoring, snacks, Bible lessons, and fun activities. It's because the people of God at Georgetown Presbyterian Church know that it is not right for at-risk children to go hungry on the weekends when they don't have the benefit of school meals to have to think that their relief will come only when they enter eternity; and so we have partnered with the Backpack Buddies program to help provide substantive meals for some of those children every weekend.

We don't look at God's great “instead” simply as some condition God will meet when God's kingdom is finally ushered in. We look at God's great “instead” as our mandate and our marching orders for today.

We don't always know what we will face in life. But as people of faith, we do know God, and that God has something marvelous in store for us. The choice is ours: Either we can walk through life upset at the cards we have been dealt, or we can choose to embrace the promise of God: a promise of good news for the oppressed, of healing for the broken heart, of freedom from captivity; a promise of God's favor. A promise of instead: Instead of mourning there will be gladness; instead of a weak and faint spirit there will be praise and thanksgiving; instead of shame there will be everlasting joy.

Choose to live into this word: *Instead*. We do not wait for it to be fulfilled finally and completely; we live each day with the great “instead” of God as our moral mandate. It is when we embrace and live into this great vision of God, that we will experience joy.

Friends, our joy hinges on that one word: Instead. That one word, and our obligation to make that promise an active reality today.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being will exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...

Amen.