

## Where Do We Go to Find Joy?

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#)

[Matthew 11:2-11](#)

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In our scripture reading from Matthew today, we have two situations when Jesus, in essence, says, "Well, go look, and then tell what you see!" First John the Baptist, who was in prison, sent his followers to see for themselves what Jesus was up to. And Jesus let them see, and then sent them back to tell John what they saw, that "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them!" (11:5). "Go tell them what you've seen!"

Then Jesus speaking to the crowds around him, asked the people what they saw when they met John. Did they see someone in soft robes, like men in royal palaces? Or did they see a prophet, or someone who was even more than a prophet? "You went, and what did you see?" Jesus said.

Jesus is asking us to go and see for ourselves the wonders of God's work. Jesus had been healing, and John had been preaching the good news. And Jesus wanted the people to recognize the miracle of new life in the people's liberation from affliction and in the people's liberation from sin. In this liberation there is joy! If you go and see, you'll know. But you won't know, unless you go and see.

The carol verse we sang today reads, "Come to Bethlehem and see Christ whose birth the angels sing"—we have to go and see!—"Come adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn King"—no soft robes, no royal crown, but—surprise!—even in a manger, we'll find a king!

When you go through life expecting hopelessness and sadness, I imagine that's what you'll find. When you dread the future, I imagine the future will be quite bleak. But the song invites us to "come to Bethlehem and see!" even though it's terribly unlikely that there would be anything worth seeing in an old barn; certainly we wouldn't expect to find a king there, that's for sure! But if we go hoping to find joy, by golly, we'll find it.

Jesus asks, what do we look for out in the wilderness, "a reed shaken by the wind"? Do we look for broken dreams and disappointments, or do we look for joy?

Let's be the angels, announcing: "Gloria in excelsis deo!" Let's be the shepherds inviting others: "Come to Bethlehem and see!"

There certainly is despair in our world: fires, urban and rural poverty, political tension, and war. Humanity seems to be without direction. I think we have to set out and go looking for joy. So where do we go to find joy?

Perhaps we find it when we get together with friends—we go over to someone's home, or invite folks in, or meet at a restaurant, and talk, have a good meal, laugh, and tell stories. We find joy when we make time for friends. And friendships take cultivating, so start this Christmas if you are new to the community, introduce yourself at our coffee hour and get acquainted. You'll find you're glad to know someone next week when you come back.

Or have a quiet evening with your family—get out the photo albums and reminisce. Make popcorn and remember the good times. If you have a chimney for Santa to come down, make a fire, that is, if it's not a "spare the air" day. Kick back. Smile.

Or put more of whatever you love into your life—if it's natural beauty, then take a walk each day and look for signs of changing season, notice subtle colors, and listen to the sounds around you.

Or if what you love is art, then take in an exhibit in the city. Or if it's a ballgame or ice hockey match, then treat yourself to a sports night out.

Or if your pleasure is music, that's easy in this season. Go to concerts, play music at home or on your commute. Breathe deeply and put yourself into the moment.

It's about being in the moment—so come and see the joy—look for it in moments set apart.

That's what Sabbath is all about, making time sacred by setting it apart from the rush of life. We are just about to finish our Jubilee Year here at Lynnewood. Jubilee is a year set apart to forgive debts, and to renew relationships with the land and with our companions on the journey. Jubilee is a celebration after fifty years, to liberate all who are oppressed. Mary's song is a song of liberation. Part of the Magnificat text, is printed as the prelude meditation this morning in your bulletin. This is Mary's song that she sang when she learned she would give birth to the Messiah. You remember Zechariah's sandwich—when he became mute for not believing, then at the end of his story, when he could speak again and he proclaimed liberation and redemption. The part in the middle is Mary's song. Her story is a story in a story, a call to Jubilee and to a new world order. Mary says: "The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1:49). She goes on to say: [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (52-53). Do you see the leveling? The rebooting? In God's kingdom, we have the opportunity to make things equal and fair again.

Before the end of the year, I invite you to take a break. Reboot your life. Unplug and reset your priorities. Forgive the people in your life where there is tension. Do that act of kindness you've been meaning to do all year. The biblical concept of Jubilee gives us permission to stop and recognize the joy of putting God first in our lives.

For you Jubilee may mean making a point of bringing joy to someone else. Right now we can buy toys for children, bake cookies and Christmas breads and deliver them to neighbors—perhaps to neighbors you don't even know. Maybe in the New Year, you will

embark on a brand-new mission. Some are training to become new Stephen Ministers; some may want to join Partners for Change and participate in a weekly ministry with people in poverty. Maybe you will tutor someone at the library. Or maybe you will join a task force here at Lynnewood to study racism and work together to do something to dismantle the racism that is so engrained in our society.

Jubilee is a word of joy, jubilation, and it is also a word of liberation.

One kind of liberation is liberation from mistakes and guilt. There is a Syrian Aramaic version of the Lord's Prayer that, when translated into English, makes clear how Jesus may have intended us to forgive one another. Jesus spoke Aramaic, so this version may have been close to his original prayer:

"Loose the cords of mistakes binding us, as we release the strands we hold of others' guilt. Lighten our load of secret debts, as we relieve others of their need to repay. Forgive our hidden past, the secret shames, as we consistently forgive what others hide" ("Forgive Us," by Marjorie J, Thompson in *Alive Now*, 2014, p.18). This version of the Lord's Prayer speaks of deep forgiveness, forgiveness of ourselves and of others. We can ask God to lift the burdens we carry when we resist forgiveness, if we are willing to let go and then experience the joy of newfound freedom.

Some of us are slaves to a habit of drinking or eating or smoking or spending money or lying... Jubilee means breaking the chains of slavery and experiencing new life and new freedom. Or you may be a slave to another kind of habit, for example the habit of judging others or yourself unfairly. Jubilee may mean for you breaking the chains of judgment and accepting instead God's grace freely given.

I am told that in *The Lord of the Rings*, Hobbits have a special way of giving gifts. Hobbits give new gifts to new friends. But for people who are very significant in their lives, a Hobbit gives something personal, something the Hobbit treasures. By giving this treasured possession, the Hobbit honors the recipient. Giving possessions redistributes excess ("The Gift of the Hobbit," by Kathryn Haueisen in *Alive Now*, 2014, p. 28). When the possessions are treasures, the gift giving shares precious memories and joy. Perhaps when you give a special gift this Christmas, you will also give the story that goes with the gift. There is no greater gift than life itself.

The Prophet Isaiah promises joy in the return of the people from exile to Jerusalem, a homecoming. There will be a highway and peace. The desert will blossom; the eyes of the blind will be opened, and there will be springs of water for all who are thirsty! Life will begin again. All the past is forgiven, and the people will rejoice and be glad.

Come and see. Trust that God is good. Open your heart to joy this Christmas. Maybe for the first time, this Christmas you will feel the joy of knowing that God loves you and wants you to begin again. Where do we find joy? In Bethlehem. Come to the manger and behold the child born to be king.