

## “Joy to the World”

by Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

12-13-20 Third Sunday of Advent

Based upon Isaiah 52:7-10; Luke 1:39-44

The great preacher Tony Campolo tells the story of a visit he made to Chicago more than a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> He stepped into an elevator, which was already occupied by a 15- or 16-year-old young man wearing his pants hanging low and his facial expression to match. “How are you doing?” Campolo asked, trying to be friendly. “All right,” the boy responded grudgingly. “Are you having a good day?” Campolo persisted. “Yeah,” the boy mumbled without showing any joy or enthusiasm whatsoever. After some awkward silence, the elevator finally reached the ground floor. But when the doors didn’t open, Campolo began to panic. Banging on the doors, he called out to whoever might be on the other side, “These doors won’t open! Can somebody out there open these doors? I need to get out of here!” Then a voice behind him said, “Sir, the door *is* open.” As Campolo turned, he realized that he was in one of those elevators that has doors on both sides. While he had been banging on the closed ones, the doors behind him had opened. Laughing at his own foolishness, Campolo looked at the boy, who remained silent and stone-faced. “Hey kid,” he said, “Laugh. This is funny.” But the kid, now convinced that Campolo was a weirdo, couldn’t wait to get away from him. “What a joyless world we live in,” he thought sighing and feeling grateful in that moment that his faith filled him with joy. “In my experience,” he observed, “there is often a joyful hilarity that permeates those who are infused with the Holy Spirit and who know the joy of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

I wish my experience matched Campolo’s, but I don’t know many Christians I would describe as “permeated with joyful hilarity.” Even before 2020 crushed people’s spirits, the Christians I know, who like me worship according to the Reformed Tradition, have tended to be more reserved in their faith than punchy with joy. The closest we get to experiencing joyful hilarity in worship is on this Sunday every year, Gaudete, or Joy Sunday, when traditionally the children of the church have put on their Christmas pageant. It’s almost impossible not to laugh watching little children dressed as sheep instinctively behave like them regardless of the script, or shepherds armed with plastic crooks trying not to whack the paper animals propped up behind them, and the joy of the Lord fills the hearts of parents and visitors alike when the children dressed as angels share the Christmas story and sing the carols that we all know and love. The young man in the elevator notwithstanding, children usually make outstanding ambassadors of joy because they experience so much more joy than adults, whose joy has been dampened by stress and social expectations. Children help us to feel the goodness in the good news in both a lighthearted and transforming way.

This year, unfortunately, we cannot have a traditional pageant. But that doesn’t mean we have to be joyless like the boy in the elevator, nor should we be. In the same way that Second Isaiah reminded us last week that our comfort actually comes from God’s promises not our circumstances, both of today’s texts remind us this week that our joy comes from God’s fulfilling those promises, not from our own experiences; moreover, these texts do so in a way that is as

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<sup>1</sup> Campolo, Tony, Stories that Feed Your Soul (Ventura: Regal, 2010), 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

sensory as a Christmas pageant is, all the better to help us hear and see and feel the promises of God coming true.

Consider the words of Second Isaiah again this morning, for example. “How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of the messengers who announces peace,” the text begins. Imagine if you have been waiting a long time for your dreams to come true and your suffering to be eased. You have waited for so long that you have almost stopped believing that you will be rescued, and stopped listening for a messenger bearing good news. Then one day, while you’re working, you suddenly hear a distant sound. It takes you a minute to realize that what you are hearing is the sound of a messenger running. **[Audio of running feet played here.]** Could it be? Yes, it is! You don’t even need to see him before your pulse starts to race and your face breaks in a smile. Just hearing his footfalls fills you with joy, like a parent who moves from exhausted sleep to wide-awake joy after hearing the sound of the pitter-patter of little barefoot feet coming down the hallway too early on Christmas morning. You know something wonderful is going to happen.

When I was in high school, I had to read a depressing and haunting Conrad Aiken short story called “*Silent Snow, Secret Snow,*” about a young boy’s descent into mental illness.<sup>3</sup> Maybe you did too. Every day the boy feels like a secret snow is falling inside him muffling his hearing and distancing him from the world. He listens for the footsteps of the mailman outside, each day hearing fewer and fewer steps until he can’t hear anything anymore and is left in his own silent, cut-off world. Well, today’s Scripture lesson tells the opposite story. It is footsteps that break through stifling and isolating grief and boredom, footsteps that bring joy and connection and hope.

This time, the message isn’t destined for the enslaved Jews in Babylon, however; they got the good news last week. This week, the good news is for the few remaining folks in Jerusalem left to stand guard over its ruins. The messengers have run all the way from Babylon shouting “God is coming! Yahweh reigns!” For years, the sentinels had been bored and depressed standing guard over what used to be a shining city. They stood watch over nothing protecting it from nothing. But now there is a messenger in the distance, and even better, behind him is God’s very self, rushing toward Zion like the Calvary. The text doesn’t say if God appeared in a pillar of fire or cloud like in the first exodus, and it’s best not to take this text too literally. This is a prophecy using figurative language to describe a liberation, not an actual news report about what happened. But the point is that in Second Isaiah’s vision, the sentinels could see and hear that God was coming. Suddenly the joy they felt could not be contained. One by one the sentinels burst out in song. **[Audio recording of 20 seconds of “Guardians of Israel” song played.]**<sup>4</sup> At long last, God was coming to town! Hallelujah!

Can you imagine the excitement and joy that day? Picking up on a phrase he used last week, for the second time, Second Isaiah uses the words “good news” to describe the amazing proclamation that God was coming to save the people. Centuries later, Christians would

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<sup>3</sup> See Aiken, Conrad, *Silent Snow, Secret Snow*, VQR, Vol. 8, No. 4, Autumn 1932, available at <https://www.vqronline.org/fiction/silent-snow-secret-snow>.

<sup>4</sup> *Im Hashem Lo Yivneh Bayis* - Shira Choir, <https://youtu.be/ckVYO9oI8vc?t=6>.

appropriate his term, *euangelion* in the Greek, and much later “Godspell” or “Gospel” in Anglo-Saxon, to describe the message of salvation Jesus preached and embodied: “Good news! All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” In today’s New Testament text, that good news is conveyed by a different messenger, John the Baptist, still *in utero*, who proclaims it not with the sound of his feet but by doing back flips inside Elizabeth. When Mary comes to visit her cousin Elizabeth it was probably with some fear and trepidation. She was worried about what would happen to her, and curious if the angel’s news about Elizabeth being pregnant in old age was true. But as soon as the women got together, baby John, still inside Elizabeth, senses that God’s chosen savior is near. His joy is much like the joy of the sentinels in the Isaiah prophecy, but the liberation Jesus would bring would be much greater than liberation of a single people from slavery and exile. Jesus was coming to save all the world.

As Christians, we are supposed to feel the kind of joy that makes a person burst out in song or do a back flip when we think about Jesus coming into the world, or at the very least we are supposed to carry within us the lightness and anticipation and assurance that comes from knowing that God’s promises came true and still are coming true in Christ. But you may be having a hard time feeling it this year. Maybe you are standing flatfooted in the elevator without energy or enthusiasm like the teenager in Chicago. If that’s true, don’t beat yourself up about it. You are not alone. There have been so many reasons for us to feel down this year. But do keep in mind two things. First, as William Barclay put it, that “We are chosen for joy. However hard the Christian way, it is both in the traveling and in the goal, the way of joy.”<sup>5</sup> Our joy doesn’t come from things being funny, although comic events can magnify it. It doesn’t come from things being easy or pain free either. It comes from hearing and seeing and feeling the truth of the good news about the presence of God in our midst.

Second, we all need to find our way into joy now one way or the other. According to neuroscientists, our brains can only process huge threats and changes for so long before we use up the blood supply which fuels our prefrontal cortexes, leaving us feeling angry, sad, exhausted, and increasingly mentally ill. Our brains need regular rest from stress in order to recharge, and when physical rest or escape isn’t possible, they need emotional rest all the more. Right now, most of the human brains in this world are starved for joy.<sup>6</sup> So, somehow, we have to find it. We have to remember it and share it.

Amazingly, something happened this year that I believe is as much a work of the Holy Spirit as it is our neurochemistry. Christians all over the world consciously or unconsciously recognized this need and put up their Christmas lights early this year. Ordinarily I am a total Grinch about Christmas decorations appearing before Thanksgiving. So, you would think the fact that around Crofton especially lights started going up about a week after Halloween would have made me even grouchier. But not this year. This year the lights felt like a gift. I suspect we have children to thank for this because I know that if my own son hadn’t pushed me to decorate, I might have skipped a lot of it this year. Now that my decorations are up, however, my heart and my brain feel lighter. The decorations are filling the role of messenger for so many, shouting

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<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Swindoll, Charles R., *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 323.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g., Wright, Robin, *Our Brains Explain the Season’s Sadness* in THE NEW YORKER, Nov. 26, 2020; retrieved Dec. 3, 2020 from <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/our-brains-explain-the-seasons-sadness>

“Open the gates of your heart to joy because God is coming and is here! It’s time to sing, yes even to laugh, because while we’ve been panicking about the closed door in front of us, the one behind us has been open the whole time. God opened it for us. Let the joyful hilarity ensue.”

If you aren’t quite feeling it this year because you are grieving or frustrated or afraid, my advice to you is to the extent you can, try to behave as if you do anyway. Do this, not because your feelings are wrong or you should deny or repress them, but because joy will help you to feel better, and through God’s grace it is possible for us to experience sadness, pain, and joy at the same time. So put up your decorations, put on your favorite Christmas music, dance around your kitchen as you make Christmas cookies. Christmas is a sensory experience. Look, listen, touch, and taste and believe that God’s promises have come and are coming true. Do this for your own sake and for the sake of those around you who can’t hear the footsteps or the singing or feel the baby kick, because they need messengers and sentinels that they can see and here, and God has called us to be them.

Madeleine L’Engle put it this way in her poem “Love’s incarnate birth”:<sup>7</sup>

Observe and contemplate.  
Make real. Bring to be.  
Because we note the falling tree  
The sound is truly heard.  
Look! The sunrise! Wait—  
    It needs us to look, to see,  
    To hear and speak the Word.

Observe and contemplate.  
The cosmos and our little earth.  
Observing, we affirm the worth  
Of sun and stars and light unfurled.  
So, let us, seeing, celebrate  
    The glory of Love’s incarnate birth  
    And sing its joy to all the world.

Observe and contemplate.  
Make real. Affirm. Say Yes,  
And in this season sing and bless  
Wind, ice, snow; rabbit and bird;  
Comet, and quark; things small and great.  
    Oh, observe and joyfully confess  
The birth of Love’s most lovely Word.

I know not all of you will be able to come or feel comfortable coming to our special Christmas Eve candlelight carol sing at 4:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve. But if the weather allows us

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<sup>7</sup> L’Engle, Madeleine, Miracle on 10<sup>th</sup> Street (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Pub., 1998), 111.

to have it, I encourage you to try to come. We will be very safely distanced and masked outside, and need to proclaim to Crofton that God is coming and is here. We have reason to shout for joy even if those around us think we are weirdos. God came to set us free, and even now is here giving comfort, hope, and saving grace to the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.