

Sunday Morning Worship at Brentwood – Dec 13, 2015

Advent 3

Living in Joy

**Isaiah 12:2-6 & Zephaniah 3:14-20 (Sermon Text = Zeph 3:17-18a)
118, 153, 63, 704**

**The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory.
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exalt over you with loud singing
as on the day of festival.
(Zephaniah 3:17-18a)**

As I mentioned in our Memorize & Ponder notes for this week,
I discovered something new this week
about the God of the Gospel
who we live in and from whom we enjoy our being.

This is a God who rejoices over us,
who is glad about us,
who sings because of us,
who throws joyous parties for us.

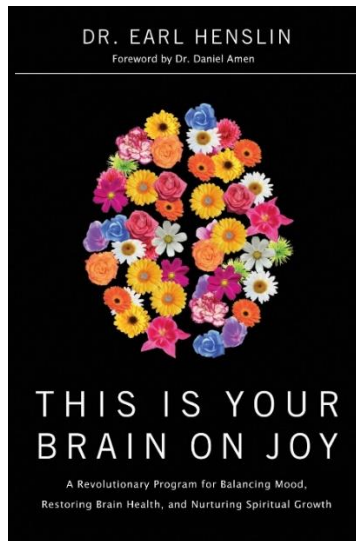
And it's not just some of the time,
the odd time when we are really good
at obeying his rules and regulations.
It's all the time,
every moment of every day.

That's hard for us humans,
with our fitful experiences of joy,
to imagine, let alone accept.
God joyed at our birth.
God joys at our living.
God will joy at our death,
as we join the welcoming party in heaven
and are incorporated even more closely
into the joyous dance of the Holy Trinity with all the saints.

But that's the reality this God of the Gospel
lives in with his people in the midst of his creation.

I think one of the things that God enjoys most about us
is our curiosity and our imaginations,
wild and wandering as those can be at times.

One of the most fascinating results of those gifts
is the design and construction
of brain-imaging machines that can show us
how the human brain works.



Earl Henslin is a Christian counsellor
who has worked closely with neuroscientist Daniel Amen.
the author of *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*,
Essentially, they argue that 'old dogs' can learn 'new tricks'
at any point in their lives,
especially when it comes to joy.

Neurons, the basics working cells of the brain,
are stimulated to grow in three ways –
by a change in outside circumstances,
by a change within the brain,
and by the way we physically feed them.

Henslin does a wonderful commentary
on Paul's letter to the Philippians
as a guide to joy for Christian disciples.
The key to joy, he suggests,
lies in the acceptance of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ
and God's determination to help us
grow into our dignity and worth as partners in creation.

The joy we are talking about here,
sharing in the joy that God takes in us,
arises from and flows through us in
the relationships we pay most attention to.

There is an American Christian thinker
by the name of Nicholas Wolterstorff.
He taught at Calvin College and Yale.
In a collection of essays published
around the time of his retirement from Yale
entitled *Educating for Life* (2002),
he writes about God's SHALOM and its connections to joy.

*Shalom is present when a person dwells at peace in all his or her relationships:
with God, with self, with fellows, with nature.*

*To dwell at peace in one's relationships,
it is not enough, however, that hostility be absent.*

Letting live is not yet shalom.

Shalom is enjoyment in one's relationships.

A nation may be at peace with all its neighbors and yet be miserable in its poverty.

*To dwell in shalom is to enjoy living before God,
to enjoy living in one's physical surroundings,
to enjoy living with one's fellows,
to enjoy life with oneself.*

(Nick Wolterstorff, *Educating for Life*, p101)

So, if we are paying attention to joy
in all of our relationships
- with God, with others, and with ourselves –
then we are growing further and further into our life in Christ,
as Paul described the gift that God gave us at Christmas.

One of the most powerful stories in the Scriptures
about God's joy in us
is the parable of Jesus that we call 'the Prodigal Son.'
As most of you know, our wonderful young church musician,
Daniel Reynolds, has written a jazz suite based on this story.
The CD with that suite on it has just been released.
We had a great release concert here on Friday night in the Sanctuary.
Dan, Conrad, Adam, Simon, and Mike are on the Island this weekend
doing a number of shows featuring the suite.
The composition originated as a graduating project
in the jazz program at McGill university,
where Dan studied with all of the others involved in this tour.

As is always the case in jazz, and can be the case in composing our lives,
each version of the suite is different,
exploring new ways of expressing the wisdom in the music,
being curious and imaginative about the ways God
is guiding the growth of our neurons
as we experience the joy of the Gospel.



This is Rembrandt's famous painting of the return of the Prodigal.
This is not a raucous, superficial joy being portrayed.
It's gentle, strong, and deep.
It's surrounded by suspicion and anger.
And in spite of that, it shines with a luminous grace.

I think Dan's choice of names for the pieces in the flow of this suite
is a brilliant bit of theology.
It begins with 'Kaleidoscope/In the Garden'
portraying the rich, diverse abundance of joy and love in God's creation.
It then takes us outside that paradise
with a movement called 'The Outsider'
in which we all, in the person of the prodigal,
go off to try and enjoy life on our own.
This takes us onto 'The Long Road' there and back
in which we discover that joy comes in relationships
with God, others, and our true selves.
That discovery, made in and through the work of the Holy Spirit,
Brings us back home and into a startling 'Love Dance.'
In that dance with God we find our true and lasting 'Subjectivity'
that lives in the flow of God's joy in us.

May the joy of discovering God's joy in us
and the spirit of Dan's wonderful suite send us out
joyfully dancing our faith into the week ahead.