

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z49
Christmas Eve (Xmas Day I) 11:00 p.m. Eucharist
14
Tuesday 24 December 2019

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-
Luke 2:1-20

Joy in the Darkness

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9).

How can we find joy even in the darkness? The temperatures on the morning of December 22, 1998 were in the sixties with intermittent blasts of spring rain. I watched the showers from the long windows of Harvard's Lamont library. Walking back to the apartment at lunchtime the weather changed back to winter. I called my wife Heidi at her office and interrupted her small talk with my insistent question, "What did the doctor say?" She said, "I'm pregnant." There is absolutely no way to express my joy.

I rushed to her downtown office. I went into the subway as one kind of person and came out the other end as something totally different. Every individual and object seemed to shine with astonishing beauty. In her office Heidi and I embraced immediately. We only let each other go in order to call everyone we knew. That Christmas, God felt so near at every moment. God seemed to rejoice with and in me.

It is one thing to experience a flash of awe when you see a sunset through the pines on a high Sierra lake, or when the light filters through the stained glass of a great cathedral and you sense the presence of the people who walked here before you, or when the closing chords of a symphony sound like heaven.

It is another thing to have a personal experience of God – not as an idea, not as a force in the way we talk about "the universe" causing some unlikely event, not as an aloof creator who made everything and leaves us to our own devices. But God as a person who cares about this world, who hears our prayers and seeks connection with us. A God who forgives. Whatever you may think on an ordinary day I encourage you to try this view on for tonight.

For me this is the heart of the Christmas story. God does not want to just listen from a distance, but to be personally involved in our life. God does this because we walk in darkness and so obviously need help. And so at Christmas, God does not blast away all the enemies of the good, but steps into history and overturns the rules of the social order by being born in a barn and laid in a feeding trough. Tonight we celebrate what Ephrem of Syria (306-373) in the fourth century calls the, "baby who holds the reins of

the universe." Or in the words of G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), the moment when, "the hands that made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of cattle."¹

At the end of the philosopher Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) book *Critique of Pure Reason* he argues that philosophy seeks to answer three questions: What can I know? What should I do? And what may I hope?² These questions help me to understand joy.

1. What can we know? At the age of twelve, in confirmation class, the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson lost his faith. The other kids there were not cool and the minister did not give a very convincing answer when Peterson asked him to reconcile the Bible's creation stories with science. He rejected religion as something for weak, ignorant and superstitious people.³

Peterson took all that youthful energy and threw it behind utopian visions of economic redistribution. He got involved in student government and the socialist party. But over time he began to see that the world was far more complex. He lost this new form of fervently held faith when he realized that he and his fellow socialists did not really like the poor that much after all.

Not long after this Peterson began having terrible nightmares that continued to haunt him during the daytime. He kept dreaming about nuclear apocalypse. In one dream his beautiful cousin was electrocuted in the basement. He ran upstairs to witness the horrifying destruction of his entire hometown. The dreams had power. Peterson became anxious and very depressed until religion saved his life.

Studying Carl Jung (1875-1961) he began to understand that our world is a place of things best explained by scientific methods. But the world is also a forum for action where we have values, set goals and accomplish aims. This subjective element lies at the heart of our experience. It is the world of the stories and symbols that orient our lives.

Perhaps the symbol that matters to us most is what Jung calls our persona, the way we appear to others and to ourselves. Jung writes, "When we analyse the persona we strip off the mask, and discover that what seemed to be individual is at bottom collective, in other words, that the persona was only a mask of the collective psyche. Fundamentally the persona is nothing real: it is a compromise between individual and society as to what a [person] appears to be."⁴

Let me be clear. Even the symbol that *is* us comes from a kind of tension between social forces and personal drives. This means that even what is closest to us remains a kind of

mystery to our conscious thought. We do not have direct access even to who we are. That's what we know.

2. My second question is "What should we do?" You are a kind of symbol to yourself. Christ is a symbol in a similar kind of way. You might think of Jesus as having a mission to change our pictures of ourselves, to become real children of God, working for the sake of God's realm of peace and justice.

Our Cathedral theme this year has been "the Body" and people have been asking me what I learned. We talked about the bodies of people who were detained at the border or in prison. We discussed healthcare, inequality, aging, pain but also pleasure. And this is what I learned. Jesus did not come here to leave us something to think about. He gives us concrete things to do, ways of being in our body with other bodies.

Jesus did not spend his last night on earth quizzing his disciples about what they should believe. Instead he taught them to wash each other's feet, to share a meal, to explore a way of being in which the greatest leader acts as servant of all. Jesus doesn't say "believe this in remembrance of me." He says, "do this in remembrance of me."⁵

We have a hard time hearing the truth of the Christmas story because it has become so overlaid with nostalgia and sentimentality. Really it is a story about two ways of existing that are still at total war with each other. On the one hand you have the arrogance of the Emperor's decree "that all the world should be registered." When you hear this you should think of – inescapable surveillance technology, cell phone location data, facial recognition cameras, disinformation campaigns, targeted killings and secret police – the apparatus that makes it possible for the state to punish all dissent. You should think of paying taxes that fund the brutal armies that torture you.

In contrast to this we have a child, from God and with God, born as a poor refugee in a barn. Invisible to the empire but recognized by the homeless, uncounted, undocumented shepherds abiding in the fields. An angelic army offers this counter-decree to them, "bringing good news of great joy for all people... to you is born... the Messiah" (Lk. 2).

Here we have: the Roman Emperor Augustus and the baby Jesus. Two individuals inhabiting totally different worlds with two conflicting stories about what is real. What should we do? Act. Act out of desire not for power but love. Share a holy meal. Care for each other.⁶

3. My final question is what should we hope? The theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) points out that at its heart "life is movement in time." We are continually desiring, striving to reach our goals and guided by ideas, relationships, obligations and hopes. For Barth, joy happens when this movement is stopped by something unexpected. It is a moment of stillness when our life ceases to have a goal and just becomes a gift.

We dream of this genuine life. And in holy moments, like tonight, we experience it. Barth writes, "Joy is really the simplest form of gratitude." He also says, "We can close ourselves off to joy. We can harden ourselves against it. We can be caught in the rut of life in movement. We can try to be merely busy."⁷

Barth goes on, "To be joyful is to expect that life will reveal itself as God's gift of grace." We cannot force joy to happen but we can stay open to it through prayer, worship and caring for others. These actions open a door for us to step out of time and into joy.

How can we find joy in the darkness? What can we know? We will always be a mystery to ourselves. This is a world of things, but it is also a world of ideas, goals, values, desires and the symbols that reveal these forces to us. What should we do? We need to worry less about thinking the right thoughts and more about how we treat each other's bodies. As the powers of authoritarianism rises with new technologies and a changing culture, we need to choose Christ's path of love, vulnerability and involvement.

What should we hope? That we will not be "merely busy" but always ready to receive the gift of our life from God. Let joy which is gratitude remain at the heart of our life and all the stories we tell about it. "The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa. 9). "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born... the Messiah" (Lk. 2). Merry Christmas!

¹ Carol Zeleski, "Christmas Wrappings: A Time for Holy Foolishness," *The Christian Century* 27 December 2005.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason, Unabridged Edition*, Tr. Norman Kemp Smith (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1965) 635.

³ Jordan B. Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (NY: Routledge, 1999) xi-xxii.

⁴ Carl Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: Vol 7. Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. Tr. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton NJ: Princeton University, Bollingen Press, 1970) 158. (Cited in Peterson, xvii).

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Our Bodies, Our Faith: Practicing Incarnation," *The Christian Century*, 27 January 2009.

⁶ Matthew Boulton, "Re-thinking Christmas Eve," *SALT*, 23 December 2019.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/12/23/rethinking-christmas-eve>

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4 The Doctrine of Creation*. Tr. A. T. MacKay, T. H. L. Parker, H. Knight, H. A. Kennedy, J. Marks (NY: T & T Clark, 1961) 376-9. In Barth's words, "Life smiles at [us], not scornfully and ironically as it sometimes can do but with friendliness, not as something unknown but in some sense well-known, because he has always meant it to turn out like this... Joy is really the simplest form of gratitude..."

