

Sermon: Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 65:17-25 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | November 13, 2022

At the consecration and ordination of Bishop Paula Cark, the Bishop of Washington, Bishop Budde spoke of what she called a 'joy quotient'. She said that in her visitation of the churches she used the joy quotient as a diagnostic tool to assess how a church was doing. In her words, "the relative presence or absence of joy revealed so much of what was or wasn't possible in that place, far more so than size or budget or sophistication of programming."

I find that very insightful. Joy is something so essential to Christian faith and yet not really given much thought. The scripture has so much to say about joy. It's as if joy is evidence of faith. Joy is listed as the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And in today's reading from the Old Testament from the prophet Isaiah, we hear about being glad, about rejoicing, and about delight. The exact words being: "be glad & rejoice"

I wonder how our church, how SPR would fare in the diagnostic of 'joy quotient'. Are we joyful? On a scale of 1 to 10 how joyful do you think our church is? But some of us may ask how can we be joyful with everything that's happening in our world? Open any news channel or website and you can see all the problems that our world is facing.

I also wonder how we fare as individuals with respect to joy in our own personal lives. Are you joyful? If yes, on a scale of 1 to 10 how joyful are you? But again, for some the question might be how can I be joyful with the things I am facing in my life? Things in my family, in my work, in my health, in my studies, or the myriad number of things that are harmfully affecting me. How can I be joyful in such circumstances?

This book of Isaiah spans decades and even centuries of Israel's history. And yet all through that history the book constantly speaks of God's hope even as the kingdom of Judah is going through very trying times. Judah is threatened by its northern neighbors. It takes the help of Assyria to stop this threat, but ends up regretting this decision, because the mighty Assyria turns Judah into a vassal state.

In a few decades, Judah tries to revolt against Assyria and ends up being badly humiliated in war. Judah just manages to escape its complete conquest by paying tribute.

The fortunes of kingdoms change in the next century, Assyria is weak, and Babylon takes over and finally completely defeats and takes over Judah, sending its people exile into Babylon.

Through all the ups and downs of its political history, these people experienced threat, defeat, and exile. And yet after each of the difficult phases of its life, this prophetic book reminded them of hope and called them to be joyful and glad.

The book speaks of a divine hope, a hope that does not ignore pain and sorrow. This is not a shallow or naïve hope. Their defeat and mass exodus meant they built houses, but they couldn't live there. They planted, but they couldn't eat the fruit of what they had planted. One might say their hopes and dreams were shattered. And yet the people are told to have hope and be glad.

This hope is divine because its fundamental source is not humans but God. The author of this hope is God. It is God who is doing something new and that is the hope. God promises to create a better world. After every

tragedy, after every painful circumstance, God promises healing and calls his people to joy and delight.

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating." The book also reminds that that joy and gladness is not just for the people, but God himself is drawn into it. God says, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people." Gladness for the people, and gladness for God.

But why should we take God's promise seriously? Why should we be glad & rejoice forever in what God is creating? I think because that's what faith is? To hold on to hope even in the most difficult and seemingly impossible circumstances and choosing to have faith in God.

Survivors of the holocaust have spoken about how they hoped in the most impossible of times. Martin Luther King Jr. said ""We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." It is hope that drives all our attempts to work towards a better world.

We labor and do our part, and we hold tight the faith, that God will bless our labor, and that our labor will bear fruit. In today's reading, God promises his people that

unlike in the past, where they could not live in their houses or enjoy the fruit of their plants they shall now "enjoy the work of their hands." Our labor will see joy & gladness.

And all this while God is active and is eager to hear our prayers and help us. God in fact is desperate to be involved in our lives, & in the world. God says, "Before they call, I will answer, while they are yet speaking, I will hear." God is like that loving parent who is always ready and eager to respond to their child's call.

And therefore, we call. We set our hearts to pray. In every Sunday liturgy we get together to say the prayers of the people. It's us calling our creator, our savior, because God is eager to answer. God is eager to answer our prayers for the world, for our country, for the church, for our family and friends, and for ourselves.

Let us hope and be joyful. Our hope in God, and the things God is creating is reason to be glad. That's a good reason to increase our joy quotient.

SPR, a good world is possible. A good world is being created even through all the trials and hardships. A better life for us is possible and God is creating it in spite of difficult times. And even as we labor for all this, let us rejoice and be glad always. Amen.