

“Rejoice”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 11; 1 Thess 5:16-24;
John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Have you ever seen a child who was really excited about something? Maybe one who just got good news, or was just given something that they had always wanted, or was told they were going to get to do something fun? I was thinking about the description of “unbridled joy,” and a child like that came into my mind. Unbridled joy. If you have watched a child who is just full of that moment, of that time of joy, it’s almost as if they can’t stand still. It’s not something that’s just in their head, it’s like their whole body is involved and active. You can see it.

I sometimes wonder why that doesn’t continue with us throughout life. I can think of some reasons. There are moments of ridicule. There are moments of disappointment. We begin to be a little more circumspect. We begin to think about what we do and whether it’s proper or not. There are all kinds of reasons. One reason, I think, is a certain fear that develops and comes along with us. Certainly I have experienced it, and it just gets in the way.

When I received the letter that said I had been awarded my sabbatical grant, you would think that would have been a moment, with this dream coming true, when I could have been really excited. Instead, I told myself I would wait until I got the actual signed copy of the agreement. There I was, bridling my joy. It’s so easy to do.

Sometimes I think that whether it’s some fear I have of change, or some uncertainty that the news may not be real, or a fear of what it might bring, I’m not able to grab hold of the full unbridled joy of the moment. Maybe it’s a common kind of experience.

It’s interesting that in Thessalonians it says not to despise the word of the prophets. Sometimes I think that because I’m not willing to grab hold of the possibility, I’ll question the source. It’s just a letter. I’ll wait until the agreement is signed.

As we hear again about John announcing the coming of Jesus, it makes me think about receiving that news. How do we receive it and look forward to it? It feels to me like there are so many voices speaking into our lives today that it’s very easy to begin to discount yet another one, to mitigate what we think God has done or is doing. We get caught up in the way of the world.

Sometimes it feels like if I’m really going to hear what John is saying, that Christ is coming, first there are a certain set of things I need to do. We all begin to think about the things we’ve done. Maybe I’m not quite there yet because I forgot to do something I think I should have done. Is God going to give me a demerit? Have I learned enough memory verses? Do I do enough devotions? Do I do enough caring for others? Sometimes it feels like I turn the announcement of Jesus coming into the beginning of a bunch of hoops I’ve got to jump through, forms that have to be filled out, lists to be checked off. Sometimes it feels like I have to do 140 different things, or more. Then maybe I can receive Christ, maybe then God will notice me, maybe then I’ll be ready for Christ to come.

The interesting thing is, John is not saying to the people coming, "Here are all the things you have to do." He simply says, "Turn to God. God is up to something." I believe that God doesn't ask us to fill out a hundred forms. He doesn't ask us to jump through a hundred hoops. God so loved the world that he gave his only son. What he's saying, I think, is, "I love you. Let me bring that to you." He could take us each by the shoulder, address us each by name, and say, "I love you. You are my child. I'm coming to let you know."

There are a lot of things in the Bible about what we can do, because he wants to lead us into life. When I think about what John is saying about the light breaking into our darkness, it's the love of God breaking in and inviting each of us to know God loves us and invites us on a wonderful journey through life together. When I think about this as the announcement of that, it's worth celebrating. Perhaps even a moment of unbridled joy, to lift our voices, to sing our lungs out.

Rejoice! God has come, God comes, and God will come. He is the God of love, and he invites us to know him and to know life. Rejoice!

Let's pray:

Gracious God, it's incredible to hear the announcement and to think that you might enter our lives, because it's incredible to think that you would do so, that you want to tell us each, "You are a loved child of God." If we hear John tell us to turn, to hear what you say to us, to hear your invitation into life, what joy! Lord, help us recognize and experience and express that joy. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.