



## *“Joy in the Darkness”*

Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

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Second Sunday after the Epiphany

I am one of many ministers wondering what to say today. We began the week preparing sermons from Scripture Lessons that are traditional for the second Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany season celebrates the light that God shines into the world in Jesus Christ.

We’ve listened to two of them, texts that have served the church well for centuries. Both texts speak of an exuberant joy that accompanies faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Today is a day of great joy in churches all over the world.

But midweek came the headlines that sent many of us back to the drawing board. How can we speak of joy in the face of the unfolding tragedy in Haiti? In an op-ed piece in Thursday’s *Washington Post*, former President Bill Clinton wrote that this is “one of the greatest emergencies in the history of the Americas.” Three million people are likely in need of aid. Countless others are dead and unaccounted for. The cleanup is mindboggling. Disposing of bodies, clearing away the rubble, tending the wounded and rebuilding a crushed nation will take resources yet to be calculated. All this in a nation already the poorest in the hemisphere and seemingly bereft of a functioning infrastructure. It’s difficult to conjure up much joy today with such massive suffering so fresh in our minds.

Like many of my colleagues, I was tempted to flee to more appropriate texts. But on further reflection, I began to wonder if, perhaps, these texts might be more appropriate than we might think at first glance.

If we start where the texts begin they take on a larger meaning. My starting point is this: some experiences in life create extraordinary joy – even in the darkest night of the soul. Such experiences, however, find their meaning in the larger context of all of life.

The deepest part of us longs for joy and often we experience joy. The prophet Isaiah seems overcome with exuberant joy at the prospect of his nation’s liberation from their long captivity in Babylon. Isaiah reminds me of that famous picture in Times Square when Germany surrendered at the end of World War II. We have a copy of the picture and I smile every time I see it. A sailor is kissing a nurse, who it turns out was a stranger. The two of them are clearly enjoying a rare and exuberant moment in the life of their nation. Some experiences create extraordinary joy.

The baptism of a child is such a moment. Weddings are, perhaps, the epitome of joy-creating human experiences – especially in some cultures.

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The wedding described in John 2 was a first century Jewish wedding. Jewish weddings back then were a weeklong celebration filled with plenty of food, wine, fun and dancing. Imagine a wedding reception that lasts for a week!

You know the story. They ran out of wine mid-week, a potential social disaster. Jesus miraculously made over one hundred gallons of vintage wine and the wedding was saved.

The point of the story is easily missed. John tells us that water becoming wine was a sign – it points to the character of the kingdom of God. It's like a feast with plenty of wine to make the heart merry and enough food to fill the heart and soul, as well as the stomach. A few chapters later Jesus put it this way, "I came that you might have life, and have it to the full."

But the story doesn't end with a wedding. It can't. Getting married is different than being married. The exuberance of the wedding day quickly settles into the routines and struggles of ordinary life. Having a child is easy. Raising a child is quite another matter.

What properly begins with great joy and high hopes is always part of the larger scheme of things. Most of life is ordinary, mundane and often quite difficult. Sometimes marriages don't work. What began in the bright light of great joy becomes a dark night of despair. The children who fill us with inexpressible joy can also, and often do, break our hearts.

That's the way things are in life. It's the weekend in which America and many churches celebrate the life and achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Who can forget the exuberant joy on the Washington Mall in 1963 when hundreds of thousands joined by a vast television audience heard King's electrifying speech, "I Have a Dream." Exuberant joy swept through the Mall and millions of us watching on television cheered. I remember. I came up out of my chair, threw my fist in the air and shouted. And I wept.

The nation changed. Within a year, the historic Civil Rights Act passed Congress and became law. People of good will and open minds cheered again. Black Americans cheered loudest of all. At long last our national nightmare was over. Except it wasn't over. It was only the beginning of a long struggle still in process. Race continues to be the subtext of much of American life.

It's worth remembering that a century before King's speech, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was approved. It abolished slavery forever on these shores. Exuberant joy swept through black communities, joined by the loud cheers of supporters of abolition. Imagine what that Sunday in April 1865 was like at Plymouth Church. The struggle in which this church played so large a part was over.

Except the struggle wasn't over. Two years later, the 14th Amendment followed, which guaranteed equal protection under the law for all Americans. It declared once and for all "All men are created equal." People cheered, glasses were raised in glad toasts, but more work needed to be done. Two years later, the 15th Amendment was necessary. It made it illegal to bar any man from voting because of race or color. More cheers, toasts and joy in the streets. But half the population – women – were still disenfranchised. There was more work to be done.

Every experience of exuberant joy, personal or national, includes future work, struggle and change. It's the way things are.

Gloria and I were guests at a Martin Luther King breakfast in Boston a number of years ago. We were among the few white persons invited. Our invitation came because I was involved in the beginning of The Ten Point Coalition. The coalition was the response to a gang shooting at a funeral at Morning Star Baptist Church. A group of inner city ministers, led by Eugene Rivers and Ray Hammond, formed the coalition to stop gang violence and drug traffic in inner-city Boston. They literally took back some very dangerous streets and neighborhoods.

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Gene and Ray asked me to support the work of the coalition, which I was eager to do. I was, in fact, the first white pastor to sign on to the Ten Point Coalition.

That Martin Luther King breakfast was a powerful experience. Breakfast was followed by soul stirring music that prepared us for a teenage boy who gave Dr. King's "I Have a Dream Speech" by memory. I was deeply moved.

That was followed by a speech – actually a sermon by Gene Rivers. Gene is a force of nature. Once a gang member in Philadelphia who had obvious potential, he was awarded a scholarship to Harvard, became a Christian, and then started a church on the most dangerous corner in urban Boston.

His eloquent and soul-stirring speech reminded us all that Dr. King's work was only a beginning. He challenged African Americans to do the necessary work in their churches and neighborhoods to turn things around. I walked out stirred by the legacy of Dr. King and determined to do my part to make racial reconciliation a reality. As our Puritan ancestors put it, there is always "more light to spring forth from God's word!"

The Epiphany season is a season celebrating God's light shining into the world. That light, revealed in the life, teaching, and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, changes lives, creates communities of joy and sustains life in our darkest moments.

The brilliance of that divine light is determined by the depth of the darkness into which it shines. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, "The people who walked in deep darkness have seen a great light."

The recurring theme in Scripture and the Christian story is the power of God's light overcoming the darkness of our lives and this world.

Haiti 2010 may just be a case in point. It is about as dark as the night can be on that sad island nation this morning. And as time passes, we will hear about heart-wrenching loss, but – at the same time – amazing triumphs of the human spirit amid the darkness.

Already, one newspaper story told of the eerie sound of hymns sung in the midst of the rubble in Port au Prince. A somewhat snarky op-ed piece in the *Times* on Thursday suggested Haitians are deluded when they sing to their God who obviously abandoned them.

But how does God shine that light into the great darkness of the world? It's usually in human forms. Biblical faith does not depend on some "*deus ex machina*" to snatch us from peril. Christian faith is radically incarnational. God became flesh and lived among us, as God's presence in the world. The people of God, in the imitation of Christ, are called to be God's presence in the world. God calls us to shine into dark places and to bring the grace and peace of God to our world.

Whatever else you say about tragedies, such events seem to bring out the best in the human spirit. Already, the generosity and goodness of nations, organizations, churches and individuals are sending a flood of goods, people, medicine, ideas and logistics to help Haitians. We may disagree about everything, but in great moments of need we join hands and hearts and do God's work. President Obama appointed former Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton to work together on the tragedy that is Haiti. The picture of the three of them standing together graces the front page of papers across the land today. Light is shining in the darkness.

Great tragedies also bring out the best in God's people. Churches and Christian organizations are mobilizing to bring light to the darkness. Congregations which tend to move at a snail's pace are moving with lightening speed to help devastated Haiti. Plymouth is only one of tens of thousands of churches already doing what we can to help.

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We've already given a generous gift to World Relief, one of our outreach partners, and we will continue to collect donations for weeks to come.

We are bringing hope to Haitians, a people known for the persistence of their hope in the face of despair. Joy will come in the morning. Joy for those whose lives are touched and even greater joy to those who give and who go to help. There will be joy in the darkness. God will come to Haiti through folks like us.

After all, Jesus said, "It is better to give than to receive." And that's a promise usually accompanied by a stab of sheer joy.

Nicholas Kristof wrote a wonderful op-ed piece in today's *Times*. Apparently – and significantly – the piece was written before the earthquake of this week. Kristof cites studies that demonstrate that people who focus their lives on wealth and career achievement are significantly less happy than people who focus on good works, religion and spirituality. It seems altruism is hardwired into the human soul. When we give ourselves and our money to God's mission on earth, the reward is joy. That joy accompanies hope for people in terrible darkness and those satisfying stabs of joy that pierce our hearts when we do the right thing, God's thing, in the world.

Amen

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