

“Leaning into Joy”  
Psalm 16:1-11 and I Peter 1:3-9  
First Presbyterian Church  
April 23, 2017  
Rev. Glen Bell

Did you catch all those promises in the scriptures this morning?

“The Lord is always before me, so my heart is glad, my soul rejoices, and my body rests secure.”

“O God, you show me the path of life. In your presence, there is fullness of joy. In your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

“God has given us new birth into living hope through the resurrection of Jesus. We are receiving the salvation of our souls.”

Wow!

You see, participating in worship and the life of the church is a living encounter with God’s Holy Spirit. God frees us from our fears by the power of the resurrection. We rejoice in a life that is centered and whole through the mercy of God Almighty.

Living, free, beyond our fears, centered, whole. That’s not only what we believe, it is who we are, not only our declared identity, but what we experience.

Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I’m humming or singing one of the songs from New Song. Sometimes I find myself on the edge of tears when I listen to an anthem by the choir or sing one of the great hymns of faith.

That’s how it is for me this morning. “Something inside of me knows that there is surely more than this.” There is life: free, centered, whole. “There are echoes of eternity around us, music within our souls, whispers of God’s destiny deep inside us.” Our hearts beat with God’s rhythm. Our souls sing to the Lord.

That’s how it is as I look ahead to our final hymn. “In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity; in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.”

I can’t think of anything harder than being a pastor or elder or deacon or choir or band member or church school teacher or parent without the heart gladness and soul rejoicing and fullness of joy of knowing God. It would be a little like being a heart surgeon without ever going to medical school.

I can’t think of anything better than being a follower of Jesus, young or old, no matter what circumstance or background, nothing better than knowing the freedom and centered wholeness that comes from knowing Christ.

Last Sunday I shared my dirty little secret, the secret of my being a Presbyterian pastor: I receive more than I give. Let me share another secret with you. Sometimes my favorite moments of worship are when I get caught up in the Spirit, and I lose myself – everything: my always thinking about What Comes Next in the service, the list of people in my head with whom I need to connect following worship, and even my own personal fears and anxieties and concerns – when I lose it all in the joy of a song or anthem.

Sometimes it’s a praise song. My beating heart, O God, like a drum, like a drum, it will beat for you. With every breath, my soul will sing to your glory.

Sometimes it’s an anthem. Oh, Maundy Thursday. Oh, Maundy Thursday! “We are not alone, God is with us. We are never alone, God is with us. God will make us strong, for God is with us. We will always press on, for God is with us.”

Sometimes it’s a hymn. “Sing praise to God, who reigns above, the God of all creation; the God of power, the God of love, the God of our salvation; with healing balm, my soul is filled, and every faithless murmur stilled. To God all praise and glory!”

Timothy McCreesh teaches theology at Providence College in Rhode Island. He writes “the real meaning of life is to belong to the Lord, to remain in the divine presence. It is this experience of God’s closeness, protection and mercy that makes all the difference.”

This is sometimes quite difficult, he goes on to say, in a world that is always pointing to tangible accomplishments. “The story of human achievements,” he writes, “has made the memory of God’s saving deeds vague and mysterious. But real faith,” he is convinced, “stretches us beyond human capability and earthly realities.”

I had a moment like that just a few days ago. I had stopped at a Starbucks, the one down here at Tamiami Trail and Bahia Vista. I walked out of the coffee shop and opened the driver’s side door of my car. And then, just before I got in the car, I happened to look up at the sky. The sky! The sky was cerulean, and that blue was almost incandescent, afire, alive. And the clouds – the clouds against the blue – the contrast was almost too beautiful to bear. It was like looking into the heart of a flame.

After five or six seconds, I got in the car. I was afraid the other people in the parking lot would think I was crazy if I kept staring up at the heavens.

I wonder if that’s how it is for you and me sometimes. There are groceries to be bought and bills to be paid and the clothes of children or parents or guests to be washed and dried and folded and put away. Stopping to appreciate the gladness and rejoicing and pleasures of God’s presence doesn’t always make it onto our list of things to do.

Another commentator on these verses from Psalm 16 is Katherine Calore, a pastor in Missouri. She points to the incredible God-given gift of steadfastness. “I keep the Lord always before me. Because God is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.” I will be steadfast.

Steadfastness, she writes, leads us through all “the metaphorical battles of life. It is a necessary quality, and one much easier for anyone who can confess that ‘the Lord is always before me.’”

Step by step, bit by bit, God leads us toward the gift of steadfastness. Sometimes for me that journey seems long, very long, maybe even endless. You see, I always seem to be living in the land of Something More to Do. There always is at least one more person with whom I should speak or email or visit – or more honestly, three or four – asking about their father’s heart condition, or sister’s surgery, or adult child’s struggle with depression. It’s not unusual for me to be emailing at stoplights, or asking Anne to wait just a minute as I make another phone call before we go into the restaurant, or using the Bluetooth in my car or the voice activation software on my iPhone.

I don’t feel steadfast. Instead of keeping the Lord always before me, I usually feel like I’ve got other concerns in front of me.

But even in the face of my failings, there is great good news. First, all the experiences God promises in these passage – gladness, rejoicing, rest, life, pleasure, hope, salvation – come as a gift from God. And second, these experiences come sometimes when we least expect them. We are encountered by God when we least expect it.

Craig Barnes is the president of Princeton Seminary. He tells this story.

“Shortly before my seventeenth birthday, my brother and I came home to learn that our parents were divorcing. Dad resigned from the church where he was pastor, and then he left – everyone. We still don’t know where he is.

“Maybe Dad’s sense of failure was so great that he couldn’t see his sons without anguishing over the family that was lost. We’ll never know. For a while my brother and I tried hard to find him, but in time we learned to let him go.

“So I know about abandonment. I know that you never really get over it. I also know it can force changes that you think will kill you, but in fact they save your life.

He continues. “The Christmas after our parents split up, my brother and I wanted to visit Mom. We didn’t have enough money for a bus, so we decided to hitchhike. If the rides went well, we figured we could make it in a couple of days. The rides did not go well. It got dark. It began to snow. There were fewer and fewer cars on the expressway.

“When we were young, my father had forced us to memorize scripture. I could never understand the purpose of it. I did it because I was told it was important, but mostly I did it because I had to.

“Standing on the side of that road, as the night got darker and the snow feel harder, my brother and I started talking about what in the world had happened to us. After a while we couldn’t really talk about it anymore. To keep our minds off the cold, we started quizzing each other on memory verses. Back and forth we went:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge the Lord,  
and God will make straight your paths.’ Proverbs 3:5

‘We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,  
who are called according to God’s purpose. Romans 8:28

‘For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare  
and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Jeremiah 29:11

‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.

When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned  
and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Isaiah 43:1-4

“That night for the first time in my life I heard those verses, maybe because I was ready to hear them. I was confused, frightened and grieving over the loss of everything that had once held my life together. I needed a savior.

“That’s the advantage of [loss and] abandonment – it makes it easier to hear God’s words of love and purpose for us.”

Sisters and brothers, God doesn’t arrive on our schedule. God doesn’t always seem to show up when it seems convenient or appropriate or fulfilling. But God always shows up on time.

Our God continues to give us amazing gifts, because it is the Lord’s nature and character to be a gift giver. Gladness, rejoicing, rest, life, pleasure, hope, salvation – these spiritual experiences come through the darkness, through the brokenness, at the most surprising moments, even when we are pretty sure it’s all just a fairy tale.

So whether we are standing with our brother in the dark and the snow on the side of an expressway, or standing with our car door open looking up at the sky in the Starbucks parking lot, no matter where we find ourselves, let us look and listen and open our hearts to the gifts and presence of our merciful God.