

"A Time For Renewal of Joy"
Zechariah 9:9

April 1,2012

Palm Sunday

What a joyful celebration Palm Sunday is – both when it happened in Biblical times and in our reenactment of it! There is such excitement, joy, and enthusiasm here. But is that always the case? One of the criticisms of orthodox Christianity is that it is lacking in joy or, some would say, it is joyless. Is that true? Does the Christian faith lack joy? Or, do we simply not know what true joy is? Continuing in our Lenten theme of renewal, Palm Sunday is a time for renewal of joy.

Why do people claim there is no joy in Christianity? Some say it's because Christianity is all about rules – all those “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not”. We want to be free to do what we want to do. Rules restrict our behavior and laws stifle our freedom. And, therefore, a religion of rules gives no joy.

Some would say there's no joy because of all the negativity in the message. We want a positive message and upbeat atmosphere. We want to hear good things, especially about ourselves. We desire encouraging affirmations of who we are and what we do. Christianity talks too much about sin and that's a real downer. Such negativity kills all joy.

Still others would say the joylessness of Christianity comes because of its lack of practicality. We live in a society that very much wants to see results whenever an activity is undertaken. Religion has to be practical. We want to see God active in meeting our needs: providing us with the wealth we want and possessions we need, healing our sicknesses, granting us success, and keeping us happy. Christianity talks about self-denial, suffering, and persecution. How can there be any joy in those things?

Our society and some religious groups have tried to change things to create joy. They have redefined God's Law and ridded themselves of various rules. By such efforts, they hope to free people to live according to the desires and dictates of their hearts. This, they say, will bring joy.

People have tried to get away from negativity by becoming non-judgmental. There is a huge emphasis on affirming and praising people. It is almost impossible to make a statement which condemns anyone or any behavior without repercussions. Sin is a dirty word in our society. It is thought that if we can just affirm the positive while ignoring or denying the negative we will have more joy.

Practicality seems to be the buzz word for many churches today. Preachers will say God wants you to have “your best life now.” Churches will claim that “you were born for victory.” Some preachers will say that God wants you to have the desires of your heart. He wants you to be wealthy. He wants you to be healthy. He wants you to be successful. And with a strong enough faith and fervent a enough prayer (and perhaps a donation to whatever preacher or ministry is telling you this), you will have those things. As a result, you will be joyful.

How do you think these societal and religious changes in the last generation or so have worked out? Do we have a surplus of joy, either in our church or our society? Freedom from the laws of God has not made people free or joyful. There seems to still be a lot of guilt, much of it repressed, no matter how much we try to eliminate sin and emphasize the positive. The “prosperity gospel” which says God wants you to be happy and successful often drives people to doubt or despair. I recently had a sick person tell me that he felt there was no God any more because, if there was a God, then He would heal him.

Maybe the problems are not what we think they are. God did not give us His Law to restrict us or make us unhappy. The Law of God is good and is given for our good. Imagine if everyone obeyed God’s Law perfectly. There would be no murder, no sexually transmitted diseases, no broken homes, no theft, and so on. This would be a good thing.

The talk of sin to a sinner is no more a bad thing than talking about illness to a sick person. If you are sick with a potentially fatal disease, you don’t want a doctor to shower you with positive platitudes so as not to hurt your feelings or damage your self-esteem. Such false optimism will kill you. You want an honest diagnosis of your disease so that you can seek treatment and a cure. In

the same way, exclusive talk of positive praise and excessive self-esteem can kill you spiritually. The talk of sin and judgment is the unpleasant diagnosis of your spiritual disease so that treatment and a cure may be administered. This would be a good thing.

As far as the practicality of our faith goes, let's say (for the sake of argument) that Christianity is all about having everything you want and being successful. Where will that eventually lead? A popular bumper sticker several years back said, "The one who dies with the most toys wins." That provoked another bumper sticker which read, "The one who dies with the most toys still dies." What good will possessions, health, and success be in the long run? If that's all your Christianity is about, then what happens when you die? Being prepared for a long term good through short term suffering is a hard sell in our instant gratification society. But, regardless of how unpopular it is, it is still a good thing.

The real problem here is not excessive rules, excessive negativity, or excessive suffering. The real problem is sin. The guilt produced by sin is what is eating us up inside, whether we know that's what it is or not. Sin separates us from God and that leads to our unhappiness. As St. Augustine wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." It is sin, not lack creature comforts or even good health, which will kill us.

What's the answer? Where is the joy? In our text, the prophet Zechariah calls for the people to have joy and he gives the reason for it. It's not freedom, self-affirmation, or success that brings joy. He says, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you." The King – the Messiah – is coming and His coming brings joy.

Zechariah gives the reason the King comes. When Jesus fulfilled this prophecy on the first Palm Sunday, the Jews of His day were much like many religious people today. The Jews saw Jesus coming to bring them earthly blessing and success. The King – Jesus – would come to defeat and expel the hated Romans. He would set up a successful kingdom here on this earth. He would make a name for the Jewish nation and provide them with every earthly blessing their hearts desired. It's no wonder it was such a raucous parade with palms and shouting.

But Zechariah says, “Behold, your king is coming to you righteous and having salvation is he.” Jesus comes in righteousness, that is, holiness. He does not come to flatter us or affirm us. He comes because there will be an accounting of our behavior before a righteous and holy God. Our sin and guilt deserve death and damnation. But Jesus comes, bringing salvation.

Zechariah tells us the way Jesus brings salvation. It would not be the way a normal king would save his subjects – by military might or earthly wealth. Zechariah says, “Behold, your king is coming to you....humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The King comes, not in power, but in humility; not to kill His rebellious subjects, but to offer His life into death to save His rebellious subjects; not to live victoriously, but die shamefully, The poetry of a beloved Lenten hymn says it so well

*What punishment so strange is suffered yonder!
The Shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander;
The Master pays the debt His servants owe Him,
Who would not know Him.*

*The sinless Son of God must die in sadness;
The sinful child of man may live in gladness.
Man forfeited his life and is acquitted;
God is committed.*

By putting Himself under the same Law we find so restrictive and perfectly obeying it; and by taking upon Himself the sin which we feel to be so negative and enduring the punishment of death and God’s judgment in hell, Jesus brought joy to this world. This is proven and confirmed by His resurrection from the dead three days later.

Now, you and I, even if we don’t have happiness as the world knows it, have true and lasting joy as God gives it. All of our violations of God’s Law have been removed from our account before Him. It doesn’t matter what your past life has been. It doesn’t matter how bad you feel your sin has been. It doesn’t matter how often you have sinned. A great burden of guilt and shame has been removed from your back. And it’s not just that the negative has been removed. You are covered in Jesus’ perfect righteousness and holiness which were placed on you in your baptism. What great joy this is in being unburdened!

You now have the truth of who you are and how you stand before God. The negative aspect of sin and guilt are not ignored in favor of false self-esteem or affirmation. We preach both Law and Gospel so that you can have an honest diagnosis of your sinful condition and can continually come back to get the cure, again and again, in God's Holy Word and in His Holy Communion. What joy there is in having that cure applied to each of us individually whenever we need it!

While God has blessed each of us in many ways, we still live in a sinful world where there is want, where there is need, and where there is suffering. In addition, as faithful followers of Christ, Jesus has promised that there will be suffering and rejection for being who we are. Yet God does not simply fix our lives here. To some extent, that would be like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic which sank 100 years ago this month. It doesn't make sense to invest much effort in improving something that is going to sink. God does not always improve our lives on this sinking planet earth. Instead, He gives us something better. By virtue of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, He has given to us eternal life. As Jesus promised, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

And this is not just extended time in this life and in this place. This is life in His presence in His heavenly kingdom. It is something beyond our ability to even imagine it. As the Bible says, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Cor. 2:9) This is joy – beyond compare, beyond imagination, and beyond limitations of time and space!

Palm Sunday renews our joy, but not in a way the Jews of that first Palm Sunday or in way that we today think. It wasn't about the parade, the platitudes, or the pizzazz of that day. It's all about the cross and the humiliating death five days later. It's all about the empty tomb and the glorious resurrection on the following Sunday. We do not have joy that is temporary and fleeting like the Palm Sunday parade. Our joy has become new. We have the joy that is eternal and stable because of

Easter Sunday. We have the joy that never disappoints, always satisfies, and lasts forever. What better joy is there? Amen.