

Life is a Celebration of God
based on Exodus 14: 19-31; 15: 1-3, 20-21, David Jahnke, 9/14/14

When I was in Corpus Christi, a dear saint of the church, Emily Carnes spoke to what she believes is the biggest problem with the Presbyterian Church today. She said it wasn't all the theological differences or membership decline or the typical things you hear about. She said the problem was that Presbyterians had lost their joy. Now that struck me like a Word straight from above and I do not think I will ever forget it. I am grateful that that is not the case here. But today I want to talk about ways to find a fuller measure of joy.

First I want to talk about how Pharaoh and his army represent powers and principalities that enslave us and keep us from joy. The same method of interpretation can be applied to the Warrior God of Joshua and Judges who helps the Israelites wipe out the Canaanites from the Promised Land. God's justice and judgment are remembered in these narratives which I talked last week. But these are some of the oldest passages in scripture and that a tribal, rather than a universal, theology underlies them. So God's Spirit today wants us to interpret Israel's enemies-- Egypt and Canaan-- allegorically as the spiritual forces of evil and chaos.

So when God lured Pharaoh armies into the sea and trapped them there until the Red Sea washed them away, this refers to Satan and his armies being washed away and destroyed and no longer having any oppressive power over us. Just as the Israelites were freed from slavery and then looked back and saw their enemy destroyed, so too should we look back at the life of Christ and in particular at his baptism and death and at how his Spirit has sanctified us and there see how the sin and guilt and shame that used to enslave us put to death. They were washed away in the waters of the Jordan. They were put to death in Jesus' tomb. And just as the Israelites were free to sing and dance their way to the mountain of God Mt. Sinai, the same goes for us now.

So hear the prophet Micah who said that God tramples our sins underfoot and hurls all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. And hear Jesus who said the Kingdom of heaven has a King who forgives the debts that his slaves are unable to pay.

Nothing need weigh us down anymore. All our debt has been lifted off of our shoulders. We can stand up straight and hold our shoulders back proudly. There is a lightness in our step that might even lead to some dancing in the aisles!

Now Jesus also says that since the King who owns everything, including us and those who sin against us, has forgiven all of our sins, we have no choice but to forgive the other stewards 70 times 7 times which, by the way, does not mean we keep track up to 490 times and then we can stop. One reason we cannot stop is because most of us know people who need to be forgiven that often! And never forget that all of this includes forgiving ourselves.

So all the crap from your past that weighs you down? The stuff that sneaks up on you when you are vulnerable? Let it go! It is already dissolved in the bottom of sea! All the crap that others want to hold against you? Let it go! It has been trampled under God's feet.

When humans remain anchored to the sins committed against them, then they are following Enemy's orders to chase after someone they should let go. When they remain anchored to the sins they committed, they are choosing to stay in the pit. This is why people end up stuck in the mud and the muck. Guilt and shame, on the one hand, anger and bearing grudges and victimhood on the other, these have no place in God's Kingdom so why give them a place in the here and now? Wash your hands of them for God has washed his hands of them after bearing them on his palms! God has parted the waters and calls us to rise up and joyfully dance to his Kingdom!

Miriam and Moses are our example here. Moses led all Israel in a song of praise to the Lord. Miriam took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing."

I heard a great new song as I was running this week. And by the way, this illustration goes out to some good church friends who were teasing me about my running illustrations a couple of weeks ago! This one is for you.

I just happen to encounter God a lot while running. In fact, when a question that came up in a Summer Fitness Facebook group that Christie invited me to-- what motivates us to exercise. My answer— it brings me joy; in other words I meet God in something good. It's the same reason the cooking and food aficionado makes a new dish; or the mechanically inclined builds or fixes something. Now neither of these bring me much joy which my wife Hailey can attest to. She has been fixing our toilet this last week...though I am not sure she encountered God there. But she can...

I have come to realize that I can meet God in any good activity and this is why I am growing in joy. Just to sum up this point—the key to joy is knowing two things: 1. The first I have mentioned, knowing that we have been completely freed from crap in the past and unfair judgment in the present from which God's Spirit can shield us; and 2. the second is knowing that good activities are a gift from God who is working in and through them. There is a difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is the temporary feeling that comes with doing something pleasant that I think I deserve. Joy is a potentially permanent state that comes with knowing God and thus doing all kinds of things that bring delight to both the self and God.

Back now to the song that had me dancing while running. I had been praying for God to lead me to joy this week with regard to my sermon and a change in my running routine on Wednesday morning was an answer to that prayer..

Normally I run in the afternoons as a release from the day's stresses and weariness. But on Wednesday I walked to school with Dietrich and decided to just run afterwards. There was a freshness in the morning air and in my step that made this morning run different. The sky was an incredibly sharp blue. I felt fully alive, rejoicing in familiar scenes and songs which can be kind of blech to me in my afternoon runs.

In Lamentations we hear that the Lord's mercies are new every morning. That was what I was remembering and experiencing. So in the midst of this runner's high, this song came on the ipod. And to preface this, the song-writer had just been through a heart-wrenching divorce prior to forming this new band and writing an album about all he had been through. Here are the lyrics that you will hear...

He's still a mess
So he hires a car
To take him to the fountain
at Balboa park
Where he used to play
When he was young
He's gonna wash off in front of God and everyone

[from "Blind Leading the Blind, movement 1, part 2" by the Punch Brothers]

Sorry that the video is shaky at first but perhaps it represents the singer's internal shakiness which turns into joyful playing and dancing after his fountain bath.

The lead singer in returning to his childhood park and remembering God, he found forgiveness from whatever was weighing him down and he was free to sing and play and dance with the joy that you saw.

God wants us to let it all go and be ourselves—that is--- be His beloved children without any shame or fear of what others think. This produces joy.

I want to conclude with words from the president of Princeton Seminary, Craig Barnes who wrote in *Christian Century* about his good friend, Steve Hayner, the president of Columbia Seminary who is dying of cancer:

“As long as I’ve known Steve Hayner, he’s signed his letters with the word *joyfully* before his name. Nothing’s changed about that: he believes that in life and death we belong to God. In Steve’s latest e-mail to me he wrote, “Both grief and joy knock us about like outsized ocean waves. The waves take us by surprise but also remind us of what it means to be human— and pursued by grace.”

Here Dr. Hayner reminds me of the apostle Paul who wrote to two different communities, commanding them “rejoice always” and one of those times, Paul was writing while in prison unjustly. Paul and Dr. Hayner are able to rejoice even in the stormiest of circumstance because when they look back on their lives, they know that it is not the enemy who is chasing them down, but rather the God of all grace who is on the chase and will catch up. For He calls them and us to eternal union with Christ Jesus to whom belongs all the power and the glory, now and forevermore. And God’s people say...