

Sermon: Rejoice in the Gladness of Christmas

Ah yes, this is a Pacific Northwest season of barren trees and chilly weather. I wonder if it's safe to go out. Will there be ice on the roads, on the sidewalks? Brrr. What unknown danger might be lurking out there? Does this freezing of the earth bring memories of frozen pipes? Sliding into frozen banks? Yet there is a certain stillness and quiet in this time too. The leaves have more or less stopped dropping. They have made a brown blanket over the earth, covering the roots of withered plants, protecting the life that lives just below the surface. The rhythm of the earth comforts me when I realize I am part of this rhythm. It effects the way I live my day.

I can get gloomy too at this time of year. Not only have the leaves fallen, but parts of my existence have fallen too. I remember when I first became an adult, I participated in the Christmas season just like my family had done, just like the majority of people I knew. I thought about gifts and wrapping paper. I thought about baking cookies, and decorating the house. And, of course, when the children came along, we launched ourselves into the culture and made Christmas for them. I loved participating in the imaginings that made the season fun and fanciful. I must make sure everyone has a stocking....even the dog!! Besides the bigger gifts, all the little stocking stuffers had to be found. Get the kids to bed so we have time to prepare this imagined scene. "That's a good idea...spread the ashes from the fireplace to show that Santa really did come down the chimney." "Shall we take just a little bite of these cookies, to prove that Santa loved our gift too?" And in the morning, we tried to make each step last as long as possible. "Wait, only one at a time to open the gifts. We want to see everything." "Stop now. Time to eat. Mom, did you make that special salmon quiche? Oh, and the bread made like a wreath. The table looks beautiful." These were all part of our created myths -- the way we made Christmas special, then.

Time passed and things changed. My Dad passed on. We moved away from extended family. We moved back again. The kids grew up and moved away. I remarried. My life changed, just like the seasons.

Traditions are different in each family. For my new husband, the gladness of Christmas always included Santa's workshop. He told me stories about his growing up --- the time he treasured the most was going out to the wood shop to be with his grandfather. He loved the smell of the wood, the sound of the tools shaping the gifts made there. Later, he and his own Dad spent many hours in the wood shop prior to Christmas day. They created things for the whole family out of their imaginations and, of course, the joy of working together, Dad and son. When we were first married, he told me, "You won't see much of me in December. I'll be busy in Santa's workshop." After a few years, he said, "none of the kids want things from the workshop. They want electronics. I can't compete with that! I don't have much to give any more." Things had changed. When my former self feels diminished, my old ways no longer satisfy, my imagination limited, I feel gloomy.

In both our worlds, situations were changing. Not only others in my life, but I had to realize that I am changing too. What has been no longer satisfies. I can't create the meaning of the season for someone else. Now I have to look at myself; where is the meaning for me? A lot of what is going on around me seems meaningless. And my gloominess invites in the cynic. How can we talk of Peace on Earth, when the realities of war and violence are all around us? I feel bombarded by

great opportunities to buy more. I have to say **No**, that is not part of my joy. It's not the money of gift giving; it is the meaning. Where can I find meaning in this barren, gloomy season? What can I do with this lost self? It's not easy. I continue to search.

And then the theologian Paul Tillich gives me something new to think about. He gives me an image of balancing the contradictions we face in life, both as individuals and cultures. He sees that freedom and destiny are opposite poles. To embrace freedom fully is to imagine that we can do and think and feel anything we want to. To embrace destiny is to acknowledge that we are locked into our history, our finite lives that are determined by our place in the world, our time in the world, and our inability to know all that exists. So what do we do with those two poles? Is there a balance between freedom and destiny that brings meaning to our lives? Tillich asks the question, "Are you hooked on some part of your destiny?" I love the question. The question invites me to ask, What have I been thinking about my past life experiences that I just can't let go of, even when they aren't me anymore? Is my husband's worth and meaning really tied to the wood shop, or is that just part of his worthiness? What if I don't put up the stockings, bake the cookies and decorate the house. Who am I and what do I treasure? What stirs in me to bring me joy? I don't believe I have an infinite amount of freedom, but I have some. I don't believe I am tied completely to the past, but the past is part of what I am today. I embrace the darkness of this time, so that I can be still enough to remember the joys of the past and imagine the hope of the future. *(Systematic Theology, vol. 1, by Tillich, Paul)*

I want to share with you something I remembered from my past because it still holds meaning for me. This story happened following a rather bleak time of my life. I think I told you that my mother was ill for several years and we were apart, except for visits during that time. At last, we were able to return home and resume our lives together. That first Christmas, we were sitting in the living room, around dinner time, when the doorbell rang. On our porch were friends from our old church, the one where my mother had sung in the choir for many years, the church where I had been the little Christmas angel and sang "While shepherds watched their flocks by night." They sang some carols to us and left a basket of goodies on the porch. My mother was kind of embarrassed. I think she felt like the "charity" person who needed help, and she had a hard time accepting that image. I had a different reaction. I thought "how nice. They still remember us." We are home, we are reconnected!!

When I remember our experience, I wonder what their experience might have been, I can only imagine. I imagine a group sitting around after Church, remembering some of the people they hadn't seen for a while. Then someone spoke up, "we could connect with them, maybe send a card, or our church newsletter." "No," someone else said, "it would be more personal to actually make contact." "But we wouldn't want to impose. We wouldn't want them to think we expected them to invite us in and feed us. But it would add to our Holiday cheer, just to see them again, to know how they are doing. Yes. What should we do?" "We could sing some songs. We could make some baskets of simple things...maybe tea and cookies. If they didn't like those things, they could share or pass them on. Yes, let's do it." "Now, let's make a list. Who can drive? When shall we go?" "We need to get together again, to choose and practice our songs. We need to assemble the

goodies. This is fun --- planning our visits together, and connecting with our outlying friends!! “ Imagining what happened for them, brings a smile to my heart. I am grateful that they reached out to us. My freedom lies in how I react to another’s gesture, and how I remember.

This idea of finding a balance between poles of awareness is helpful. There are another two poles Tillich describes that create meaning for me. The poles are Form and Dynamic. The idea of Form in its ultimate sense is rigid and unbendable. *This is the way things are. This is what has always been done.* Maybe you remember some Christmas times when you were a child and thought, “Oh this is the way the Christmas season is done – it must be this way.” As you grew up, maybe, like me, you began to question whether this way held meaning for you. And so, you abandoned that “form” of celebrating the holidays. Maybe you selected some memorable parts and found new ways that held meaning for you. This is the dynamic end of the pole Tillich talks about. Sometimes I think of this end of dynamic as chaos. My mind wants to throw everything out and just imagine all sorts of new mythologies that I can try. Tillich claims we have the chance to transform reality. This is our freedom. We can be open to and receive life as if we were a two-year-old child. This is the dynamic part of ourselves. Our imagination is an important part of being human. Imagine and dream of new meanings, new ways to claim this holiday season. (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, by Tillich, Paul)

I try to see the two-year-old child, as part of me. Luckily, I am helped by others. The other day, I heard someone tell me about their traditions and it reminded me of the playfulness of a child. In their family, the father of the family loves to put up colored lights in the yard and on the house. He doesn’t do it the same way every time. He just starts going and lets his creativity lead him to a strand here and a strand there. The more I listened, the more I could see in my mind the fun this man was having creating colorful brightness for his family and neighbors. Then he noticed the barren tree limbs in the yard and decided to trim a few and bring them into the house. He put little white lights on these branches and propped them up inside, letting that free spirit of light brighten even the darkest corner inside.

We have put up a simple strand of lights outside, and an evergreen wreath, and let others in our neighborhood delight us with their outdoor decorations. This is where I can get in to trouble with my cynic. Are these lights wasting precious electric resources? Are those neighbors using the LED type? They are blocking out the darkness that can be peaceful in this season. But I have decided that part of the Christmas season for me is just putting my cynic aside. There is plenty of time for analysis and critical thinking the rest of the year. I want to remind myself of that two-year-old child put my emphasis where I can be open to receive whatever joy and laughter is in the air.

Maya Angelou has a suggestion for every day: “Laugh as much as you can! Take every opportunity to Rejoice. Find the humor in life at every opportunity. A cheerful spirit is good medicine and sometimes a good laugh can be as healing as an aspirin.” Healing our spirit is important any time of the year.

(*Maya Angelou, the poetry of living*, by Margaret Courtney-Clarke, p. 19)

At my house, I always start with music. As soon as thanksgiving is done, the leftovers packed up, and the dishes done, I get out my stack of Christmas music. I don’t play this music at other times of the year. Music is part of what makes this

season special. . There is the richness of the Mormon tabernacle choir singing, "I'll be home for Christmas." The fantasy of the Nutcracker composed by Tchaikovsky, *the Story of the Littlest Angel*, which never fails to bring tears to my eyes. The deep voice of Mahalia Jackson, singing "Silent Night." Over the years I have added to the music. As my own theology has expanded, so has my music collection. I love the pastoral sound of the clarinet by Andy Statman, and the clear vocal of Loreena McKennitt. Each one brings me out of any gloominess. Just as life is stirring in the evergreen, my body is stirred by the melodies and harmonies of music in my collection. Memory is mixed with comfort and I am ready to let go and sink into the beauty that is present.

I am aware of my life's changes, and the natural world too. I see the beauty, the sacred in the universe as it cyclically reincarnates itself. Not only do I see the trees, both evergreen and barren, I see the moon and the stars. Our new scientific discoveries tell us that our Universe is expanding. Can you imagine such a thing? I am having a difficult time imagining the Cosmos as expanding, stars dying and being born. But I can imagine the beauty and awe of creation, which includes the earth as well as the heavens. I can imagine that many years ago, when the writer of the gospel of Matthew wanted to tell the story of a birth that would change the way people would act in the world, he turned to the stars. He told of a star so bright and unusual that people, from the most humble shepherd, to the most prestigious king would notice the star and realize that something special was happening, something to pay attention to. There is hope for new possibilities in the world. The powerful can be concerned with those who have no power. Humans can show kindness to the stranger. Humans can imagine apocalypse and punishment, but they can also imagine angels and Santas, and babes who emerge and change our lives for the better.

Bring on that free spirit that can sing and dance to the song of "Jingle Bells." -- that can cry with the preciousness of a gift from a child. May all our feelings be ignited by common things --- candles, evergreen wreaths and neighborhood lights.

Benediction:

for you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Singing the Living Tradition, #708