

Christmas Joys, Christmas Sorrows

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Isaiah 9:2 and 9:6 — The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Psalms 96:1-5 — O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise! For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In the LORD's hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are God's also. The sea is God's, for God made it, and the dry land, which the LORD's hands have formed.

Both of our readings this morning are from the Hebrew bible, what most Christians call the Old Testament. Both texts were written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, and so originally they were not about Jesus. Nevertheless, they feel right to me on this Christmas morning, mostly because they are joyful readings, and today is — as much as any other day in the Christian year — a day of joy. Today we celebrate Emmanuel, a Hebrew phrase meaning “God with us.” We celebrate not only God with us, but God *as one of us*: God uniquely present in the person of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, God being born. As we spoke about last night, this divine and human birth is, above all, a gesture of God’s love for us. The holy and sovereign God took on human flesh and suffered on earth to show us that God is literally dying to love us. This baby in a manger is telling us, through his very existence, that we are God’s beloved. So indeed, as the psalmist writes, “let us make a joyful noise!”

And yet, in both of these passages, there are notes of grief and hardship. Even as a joyful noise is made, a sorrowful noise is not far off. In Isaiah 9, our first reading, the prophet mentions that people have been walking in darkness. Then, he says again, lingering on this point: they’ve been *living* in *deep* darkness. Even though a great light is shining now, Isaiah doesn’t want us to forget or to gloss over the darkness we’ve known.

And then in Psalm 96, our second reading, we are told that “in the LORD’s hands are the depths of the earth,” and later we read that “the sea is God’s, for God made it.” These words don’t hit our modern eyes and ears as they would have hit an ancient audience: in the worldview of most ancient Hebrews, the depths of the earth are where those who have died dwell, as well as where the forces of death dwell. So, the psalm is saying, “In the LORD’s hands are the dead and the forces of death” — it sounds more sobering than joyful to me. And then, there’s the sea. For ancient Hebrews, the sea was a dangerous unknown. Back then, many people perished while traveling at sea, and there was a widespread belief that horrible monsters lived below the surface. For ancient peoples, the sea was a symbol of chaos — scary and at times destructive chaos.

Interestingly, Psalm 96 claims that God is the owner and author of the chaos: “the sea is God’s, for God made it.” Is that a reason to rejoice? Perhaps — but it certainly doesn’t seem that way during those times when we feel like we’re drowning.

So, in the joyful melody of these two passages, there are some dissonant notes, sobering and sorrowful. Even as we celebrate the great light, we are called to commemorate the darknesses; even as we rejoice on the heights of the mountains, we look down and take note of the depths of the earth; and even as we thank God for the dry land, we remember and respect the sea, the chaos. Joyful melodies, dissonant notes of sorrow. But is it dissonance, or is it a complex harmony — richly and beautifully textured in ways that a simple happy tune could never be? One of my favorite authors, Henri Nouwen, wrote a lot about the harmony of joy and sorrow. Hear these words from him: “We need to remind each other that the cup of sorrow is also the cup of joy, that precisely what causes us sadness can become the fertile ground for gladness.” “Joy is hidden in sorrow and sorrow in joy. If we try to avoid sorrow at all costs, we may never taste joy. . . . Joy and sorrow are the parents of our spiritual growth.” And lastly, “Any dance of celebration must weave both the sorrows and the blessings into a joyful step.” For Henri Nouwen, it only makes sense that the joyful voice and the sorrowful voice would sing together — and in fact, they can be the same voice.

Friends, on this Christmas day, we have reason to rejoice, and we have reason to grieve. Both the joyful noise and the sorrowful noise are welcome here, and God is with us — Emmanuel — in both sounds. As we sing melodies of joy this morning, know that you are free to sing harmonies of grief, and God not only hears you; God echoes you. Amen.