

Advent 3, 2017

### The Ingredients for Joy

Today is the 3rd Sunday of Advent. Along with others around the world, we light a pink candle to mark Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete comes from the Latin root meaning *joy*. With just one more week until Christmas, we are meant to notice the joy that comes with waiting for Christ and that Christ is so near!

This past summer, I began making special trips to the grocery store to look at magazines. Although feeling settled in Texas, I still have much to learn and have been attracted by the many pictures and articles--particularly about southern dinner parties. I am entranced by pictures of dinner parties held in barns and themed place settings. Eventually, I ordered a subscription to Southern Living Magazine—with a naïve hope of sustained education in southern table settings and recipes. As some of you may know, or perhaps I am actually the only one who reads this magazine as someone so new to this part of the world, the December Special Double Issue headline is *The Joy of Christmas: Our Best Recipes and Ideas for an Inspiring Season*. Inside, in addition to lovely holiday decorating tips, there is an abundance of cookie and cake recipes. Reading through I thought the eggnog spice cake with bourbon custard would be a good challenge and special treat for a holiday dinner party (not held in a barn) I went to recently.

Unfortunately, as I continue to learn, not all baking is like bread and scones. Those seem more like a creative expression than a science. It turns out that the ingredients I forgot— baking powder and cornstarch-- are actually integral to the final product which is a cake with any kind of volume and/or beauty. Amazingly, the recipe knows what it is saying and skipping parts or

ingredients on this occasion didn't work. To find the joy described on that cover each part of the recipe matters.

In the Episcopal Church, we read from a different "manual for joy" but still receive it seasonally. Our readings come from a three-year lectionary, or rotation of biblical passages. Over the course of three years, we get a *good* and thorough taste of the bible working through different parts of the Old and New Testament, but it doesn't include everything—we do not end up hearing every part of the Bible. For example, today's lesson from Isaiah includes verses 1-4, and 8-10 but never, in our lectionary, in any year, do we hear the entirety of this 61st chapter (v 5-7).

And, as it turns out, these verses are important, especially when it comes to finding joy. Verses 5-7, those we don't hear read:

5 Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,  
foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines;  
6 but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you  
shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy  
the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you  
shall glory.

7 Because their shame was double, and dishonor was  
proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a  
double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs.

Perhaps it is left out because the first two verses, 5 and 6, are a bit like a dash of cinnamon or an extra pinch of salt—they might not change everything, just adding something subtle—they are context specific. Written around 515 BC after Israel returns from exile, it describes what restoration will be like--that when Zion, known at the time as the mountain on

which Jerusalem is built, is restored all of Israel will be lifted up as Priests. At the time, the priestly class was only a select few,<sup>1</sup> but Isaiah brings hope that in the days to come all will be lifted up as God's chosen people to serve God in the temple--and that all will enjoy the wealth of all the nations. The last verse especially is important to hear at any time, but certainly when trying to understand *joy*:

7 Because their (or your) shame was double,  
and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot,  
therefore they shall possess a double portion;  
everlasting joy shall be theirs.

In this chapter about what salvation will be like it adds an important layer—everlasting joy is a reward from God, not just for when things are going well but even and especially given to those who know shame and dishonor. This is common knowledge in reconciliation work. We must face the dark parts of our history and our stories before true reconciliation can happen. This applies to reconciliation between groups, races or even with another person. We cannot move forward by hiding the darker parts of our past but, of course, it also applies within our own selves. In this final week of Advent, as we look for the Messiah, we wait for what the promise of salvation really is. We cannot overlook the fact that everlasting joy comes to us not just when everything looks great and we appear to be perfectly happy, but, also, when we accept and do not hide that we have experienced or currently experience pain or sadness and we give those over to God

---

<sup>1</sup> Claus Westerman, *Old Testament Studies: Isaiah 40-66*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1969.

We are joyful because God has come into our life and we have faith—and we try to grow in this faith during Advent. No matter how great the pain and despair is—God’s promise and God’s *joy* is greater. The secret of this verse left out of our readings is that our joy comes from a Messiah who enters the messiness and pain of our human life and lifts it up to something more. It can be frightening to imagine what salvation really looks like because we fear it could never really happen but we are given these weeks to let our imaginations envision what God’s reign might look like; what it means for God to dwell with us. When we do that, when we can imagine how great God’s coming is and will be, the hope and that joy that come with it become part of who we are today.

Today, may we remind ourselves to truly imagine how great the Messiah we wait for is. We believe in a Messiah that brings salvation to all; that comes to bring everything and everyone that is in darkness into light; that Christ comes to rebuild what has been destroyed; to wipe away every tear from those who mourn or weep; to anoint us all with gladness and not despair. This is where we find our hope. It is our joy! And Advent is about preparing our hearts to trust in this.

The final product waits for us— but it does not do us well to skip over important ingredients-- those parts of our story that lead to the final product intended for us from God.

In this final week of Advent I invite you, I urge you really, to remember what God’s promise made in Christ really means; what it looks like—what the world is when ruins are rebuilt; those who have been dishonored are given joy—for when we can see it, when we can believe it, we begin to become it.

A holy Advent week to all of you and may God's gift of everlasting joy begin to fill us all with an unshakeable confidence that nothing can separate us from the full, the eternal love and joy of God.