



Sermons **from Northwood United Church**

“Joy: Nourishing the Vision.”

Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:47-55

Will Sparks

December 15th 2013

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

The third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday in which the candle of joy appears in the wreath and we pray for joy to break forth. And in our readings from the Bible today we are given "breaking forth" words.

From the prophet Isaiah, writing to a people longing for a home, we hear the hope-filled poetry: "The wilderness and the dry lands shall be glad... the desert shall bloom... the eyes of the blind shall be opened; the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.... waters will break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert... they shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." This is hope. This is promise. This is looking forward to a great turning with great expectation.

And Mary, having visited her sister Elizabeth, breaks forth in song, a song strikingly similar to the hopeful words of Isaiah: "God has shown strength in the arm and scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts... God has put down the mighty and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry..." And although these words are in the present tense, they are also expectations of a hopeful breaking forth that overflow into a song of promise. God will restore the fortunes of the least and the lost.

This week I have been thinking about what makes for joy that is real, not just a happy disposition which, though lovely, can ebb and flow with the circumstance. Because joy seems to be something independent of circumstance. I saw it on the faces of children in Guatemala, some of whom who were malnourished and living in poverty, and yet joy was there. I certainly saw it in the elderly who gather daily for lunch, the one meal a day that they get. Yet their eyes can light up with joy. I certainly experienced it in Julia, the little girl who snapped off dozens of pictures on Treena's camera in the little mountain village of Chwitzie Ribal, giggling with her friends. Somehow joy in living is possible regardless of the circumstances of life, and I have been thinking about how that is possible. I visited with Rosa Fun this week, and it is there in her too- an irrepressibility- a joy, even in the midst of cancer treatment.

It is awesome. How does that work? What makes joy real? Real joy is so much more than a light-hearted feeling. Joy breaks forth when we carry a knowing deep inside, acknowledged or not, that we are not alone, and that ultimately (in the words of Julian of Norwich) all shall be well. This is not an appeal to the evidence- things are trending up, but rather an appeal to a deep hearted knowing, the faith that no matter what, we have a spiritual home, we have a blessed place in the dance of life. This is what cultivates joy in us.

I don't know if I have ever told you the legend of Chin Lin. Edward Hayes tells the story of a woman who knew, like Isaiah and Mary, the joy of deep-hearted knowing. She was a beautiful woman who would, early every morning, pedal her bicycle through the pre-dawn grey of the morning to the Red Dragon Chinese Restaurant where she worked as a baker and a waitress. But that was not her most important job. Her most important job was writing the fortunes for the fortune cookies she baked every day.

Every morning she would unlock the back door and go into the silent kitchen. She would take out a woven mat and place it on the floor in front of the window facing east. Then she would kneel down on the mat and bow deeply. And there, surrounded by pots and pans, knives and cutting boards, she would pray.

Then, after about 20 minutes, as the sun splashed its first light upon her work place, she would roll up the mat, place it back in the closet, she would take a seat at a table and she would write out the day's fortunes. They usually came quickly. Unknown faces would appear on the page and every fortune was unique and personal. For Chin Lin, there were no anonymous fortunes. They came quickly. she was inspired.

By the time she was finished, the sounds of the back alley proclaimed the beginning of a new day, and soon the Buddha-looking cook and owner of the Red Dragon would arrive. Before long the smell of Won Ton Soup and sweet and sour wafted through the restaurant. Chin Lin prepared the dough for the cookies, carefully placed a fortune in each, and with a mystical smile, placed them in the oven.

Much later in the day, she took off her baking clothes and put on her waitress clothes for the last part of her vocation. People thought she was just an ordinary waitress in a Chinese Restaurant, but really she was a messenger. When dinner guests finished their meal, she would clear the table of their dishes. Then, having chosen the correct fortune for each guest, she would place the blue rimmed plate holding only a single fortune for each guest, bow and leave.

Each evening the scene was the same. People would open their fortune cookie, read the fortune, then slowly begin to share the message with another with a laugh and sometimes discussion. They would eat the cookie, or not, and casually place the messages on the side of their plates or on the table beside the broken bits of cookie. Most often, fortunes littered the tables after guests had left. But this evening was different.

A young couple had dined at the Red Dragon. After dinner, Chin Kin had placed their fortune cookies before them with a bow. Each read theirs in turn and read it to each other and smiled. The young woman excused herself and went to the washroom. While she was gone, the young man read and re-read his message. And then he quickly placed the small message in his mouth and ate it!! Next he took a bite of the cookie, and placed the rest in his pocket. His date returned and they left the Red Dragon. Chin Lin was overjoyed. She knew that here was a young man who understood the secret of a joyful life.

You see, Chin Lin, Isaiah, Mary, this young man, they all are working with a secret at the heart of life that gives rise to joy. The secret is that fortunes, or promises, or sacred dreams come to us. And we choose whether or not to take them in, make them a part of our lives- to own them. If we take them in, if we internalize them- take them in through our eyes and ears, into our heart and soul, then they have a chance of becoming real in our lives. But taking them in is not enough. You have to also feed them, nourish them.

We have a fortune, you and I- you could also call it a sacred dream. It has been delivered to us like a fortune on a blue rimmed plate at the Red Dragon. "The eyes of the blind shall be opened; the ears of the deaf unstopped... the tongue of the speechless sing for joy... waters will break forth in the desert." No matter what the desert, the wilderness, the chaos, the darkness, there shall be a great turning, there shall be renewed strength, restoration, new light and life.

Call it a fortune, call it a prophesy, call it a promise, a sacred dream. It is a message for the future. Have we swallowed it, made it part of our being? Do we nourish that dream? Because that dream is where real joy comes from.

Oh, the man's fortune? "You will die a happy man." And that evening he wondered, "will I die tonight? If so, I must make this night the happiest of my life." He did not die that night, but he awoke the next morning, remembering the fortune. He took another small bite of the cookie, placed it in the top drawer of the dresser and went about his day determined that if he died that day, his fortune would have been correct.

We have to take in the dream, the fortune, the sacred promise. Then we have to nourish it, cultivate it. And finally we have to commit to it. And if we do, we will be a people of great joy.
Amen.