

Dec. 10/11, 2011

Covenant, Stoughton

Joy

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart!

In the prelude video we saw women and children in Africa walking with five gallon buckets to fetch water from a stream. Like so many in our world they do not have fresh water at the turning of a faucet. They often walk miles to a stream or well for water. Yet they have joy, joy in having water, water that sustains their lives. They talk and smile, sing and sway as they return to their home or village balancing the 40-pound container of water on their heads. They know joy. They rejoice that it is well, it is well with their soul.

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Last Sunday brought joy to the Khati family, the Bhutanese family who had been refugees in Nepal for 17 years before Covenant helped them resettle in Madison 14 months ago. Last Sunday their daughter, Durga, married Narayan, who resettled from Nepal two years ago with his family in Chicago. My wife, Solveig, and I shared their joy as we witnessed the marriage ceremony in the Khati apartment and then shared in the reception at a Madison school in the afternoon. The day seemed so different to us from our culture, for the bride seemed sad on her wedding day. We learned that is typical, for she leaves her family to live with the family of her new husband. Her joy of uniting mixes with the sadness of separating. We saw that day what we heard at the end of the video, "*whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.*"

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Solveig and I had a special day on Thursday. Our younger daughter came to our house for lunch; she brought our 18-day-old grandson with her! After they had returned to their home,

Solveig and I drove to UW-Stevens Point to attend a concert. Our 18-year-old granddaughter played oboe in the concert band. Her mom, our older daughter who lives in Upper Michigan, drove down with her in-laws. What joy we had that day!

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Joy marks all the readings this third weekend of Advent as we draw closer to Christmas. Isaiah brims with joy as he shares the good news that God sends a spirit-filled one to...*to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn...* God's chosen people had been exiles for 70 years when God provided for their return to their homeland. But to their sorrow, they found a demolished city, an economy in ruins. What will happen? Can we hope for a better future? The prophet declares words of assurance. God has not forgotten them. God will not abandon them. Rather God will dwell with them to bring newness. And we heard the people respond, *"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness..."* That sounds like those words in the video, *"whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul."*

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Those Hebrew people six centuries before Jesus knew joy. The early followers of Jesus hear a word from St. Paul calling them to rejoice. *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."* Life for early followers of Jesus did not go easy. Both religious and political leaders did not welcome them. Even within the community of believers tensions arose; just before the words we heard, Paul had written, *"...admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak...see that none of you repays evil for evil..."* In the face of those struggles—persecution by authorities,

fellow followers who were idlers, fainthearted, weak, or evil—in spite of those realities, St. Paul trusted that God had chosen those folks and would not let them go. God’s Spirit would guide them and give them growth as followers of Jesus. They did not go it alone.

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Finally in the gospel we witness the witness, John. I often think of John as a somber, sober, austere, frightening figure, lashing out, laying guilt on people. But in listening more closely to this gospel I see a man who knows who he is and knows his purpose. John is a witness, a person who gives testimony, a person called to speak the truth. John knew that he could not say, “*I am the light of the world*” but that another could. John knew that the one who created light came among us as the light, came as a human like him yet so unlike him, came wearing sandals with thongs that John felt unworthy to untie. John knew his identity...not the Messiah, God’s promised deliverer...not Elijah who preceded the Messiah...not the prophet. John knew his purpose to point beyond himself to Jesus. John knew he needed to prepare people to meet the promised one, the light, the God who became flesh and dwelt among humans. Fulfilling his purpose gave John great joy.

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Isaiah, Paul, and John have great joy in pointing beyond themselves to God, the source of renewal, of newness, of light and life. When God breaks into our lives, when God enters our darkness, when we see Jesus go to the cross because he will not stop loving us, when Jesus restores us again to community through the power of forgiveness, then we have joy. Then we join Isaiah and Paul and John in pointing out Jesus to others, to Jesus as God with us to bring hope, and love, and peace. And in our testifying, joy fills our hearts, too.

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