

Joyful and Broken Hallelujahs

Ottawa Mennonite Church

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Fourth Sunday of Advent: 19 December 2010

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

Expectations of Christmas joy

On the count of three experience joy. Ready? 1....2....3.... So, is everyone joyful now? Hmmm. Maybe that didn't work. That's okay. Let's try something else.

Imagine a crisp chicken McNugget. You are tenderly holding the golden disc in your fingers, you ease it into the Jolly Green Apple special edition holiday dipping sauce, you raise the nugget to your lips and take a bite, savouring the tangy, seasonal flavour. So, are you joyful now? Maybe not... but that's fine...we're not all McNugget people.

There are many other options. I hear joy can also be evoked by a nice sparkling white from the LCBO or a sweater from RW or visiting the Pepsi website or, if you are really committed to this, a new BMW where, apparently, they "don't just make cars, they make joy."¹

It's almost Christmas. There is an expectation that we *should* be joyful. 23rd....24th....25th.... So, is everyone joyful now? If we do not naturally feel joy there are plenty of people trying to sell it to us. Personally, I recommend Pepsi as a more cost effective option than the BMW.

Less than Merry Christmases

Christmas is a very happy season for many of us. We take a break from our ordinary routines and spend time with people we care about. But I have to admit that my Christmases have not always been merry.

The Christmas of my first year of university, both my mother's parents passed away: my grandmother just before Christmas and my grandfather right after. That was a hard Christmas for my family.

Last year, the relationship that had shaped the previous six year of my life ended a month before Christmas. The pain of that loss, and the accompanying uncertainty about the future, overwhelmed the holiday season.

This Christmas, I find myself in a new city, with a new job, a new church, a new home, surrounded by new people. In the last six months, almost everything in my life has changed. These transitions are especially difficult at a time when tradition is so important.

¹ http://www.bmw.com/com/en/insights/technology/joy/bmw_joy.html

There are many other circumstances—illness, financial worry, stress, tense family relationships, loneliness—that can prevent us from experiencing the joy we are *supposed* to feel at this time of year.

Drifting through our sadness, perhaps even teetering on the brink of despair, we cry out with the Psalmist:

How long, O God, with you hide from your people?

We long to see your face.

Draw near to us.²

God drawing near to us

The real joy we celebrate at Christmas is grounded in God drawing near to us. Christmas is not about escaping from reality, about being whisked away to some perpetually cheerful realm with angels and fluffy clouds and unlimited cream cheese.

Christmas is about God joining us in this life in this world. It is about God having a body with bones, and muscles, and skin, and blood, and brain, and heart, and lungs. Christmas is about God breathing, and thinking, and feeling *with us*. It is about God knowing this life in this world in all its beauty and all its brokenness. *This is God's ultimate affirmation of human life: that God lives this life among us, that this is a life worth living.*

To settle for the romance of the virgin birth, or the choirs of angels, or the guiding star is to dwell on mundane details when the overwhelming and concrete mystery of the incarnation, of God being *enfleshed*, is right in front of us.

Broken hallelujahs

Joy grounded in the incarnation is not the same as feeling happy or experiencing pleasure. It can coexist with pain.

A few minutes ago we sang the refrain of the classic Leonard Cohen song “Hallelujah.” This song written in the early 1980s has become a cultural anthem for naming joy in the midst of pain. It has been sung at Haiti Benefit concerts and September 11th memorials, at weddings and funerals.

It allows us to say that:

...even though

It all went wrong

[We'll] stand before the Lord of Song

With nothing on [our] tongue but Hallelujah.³

² Psalm 80 as paraphrased in “Save us, O Lord,” *Sing the Story* 6.

³ Lyrics are available online. <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/leonardcohen/hallelujah.html>

It is “a cold and a broken hallelujah,” that is nevertheless “a holy hallelujah.”

When asked about the meaning of this song, Cohen said:

This world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled but there are moments when we can transcend the dualistic system and reconcile and embrace the whole mess and that's what I mean by Hallelujah. ... Regardless of what the impossibility of the situation is, there is a moment when you open your mouth and you throw open your arms and you embrace the thing and you just say 'Hallelujah!'⁴

As Christians, we can embrace this life in all its messiness because God embraced this life in all its messiness by living this life as Jesus.

The hard life of the holy family

Jesus and his family did not have an easy life. God drawing near did not result in the happy pleasurable joy promised by seasonal dipping sauce. In fact, Joseph and Mary's lives became a lot more complicated when God joined them in Jesus.

First, both parents had to make a commitment from which it would have been much easier to walk away. We heard about Joseph's struggle in the gospel of Matthew, and saw it enacted in the Christmas Program last Sunday night.

Then Mary and Joseph give birth to the child under difficult circumstances. Christmas carols depict this scene as serene, peaceful, painless: a disturbingly quite infant resting on a sterilized nest of soft hay. No pain. No crying. No bodily fluids. I doubt childbirth was this different in the first century than it is today, especially when taking place in a space intended for animals. Where are the real bodies, the real mess, the real fear?

Furthermore, throughout Jesus' first years of life, Mary and Joseph were pawns of those in power, moving first to Bethlehem, then to Egypt, and finally returning to Nazareth.

When they at last settle down Jesus runs away to the temple as a young boy, leaves home to become a controversial wandering teacher, is rejected by his home town community, denounces his family, and is tortured and executed.

I'm not sure this is what Mary and Joseph thought they were signing up for. Maybe they were right to be afraid of angels. At this point in my life, very few things scare me as much as the thought of having children, however, being a parent of the messiah would definitely be one of those things.

⁴ Interview with Leonard Cohen presented by John McKenna. RTE Ireland, May 9 & 12, 1988.
<http://www.leonardcohenfiles.com/rte.html>

The holy family knew the pain and brokenness of this life and world. And yet, *God was with them*. In an incredibly concrete way, God affirmed their life and, in doing so, our lives; God affirmed their world and, in doing so, our world.

A time to feast

But Jesus' life was not all doom and gloom. In fact, Jesus was known for partying. We read in Luke 5 that some Pharisees and Scribes were complaining to Jesus: "John's disciples are well-known for keeping fasts and saying prayers. Also the Pharisees. Why do you seem to spend most of your time at parties?"

Jesus replied, "You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?"⁵

This is the time of year when we say that God is with us— the bridegroom is here! Therefore, we feast! Our feast, our celebration, does not deny the problems in our lives or the world. It does not force feelings of happiness or pleasure. But it is joyful! It affirms life, because God is with us.

Everyone is invited

Jesus' feast does not celebrate one particular type of life. The Pharisees and scribes were also complaining about this: "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus replied: "It is those who are sick not those who are well who are in need of a physician."⁶

We all know brokenness in some form. We are all in need of healing. Everyone is invited to this feast: nuclear families and those free to leave everything and follow, practicing people of faith and the spiritual but not religious, those who can afford a mountain of presents and those who cannot put Christmas dinner on the table. We are all *invited* to this feast.

Everyone is needed

We are all *needed* at this feast. Because *the incarnation is not only about God's presence in Christ, but about God's presence in all human lives.*⁷ We can meet God in one another.

In Matthew 25 Jesus says: "What you did for others you did for me."⁸ Christmas is a time of year when we serve one another, not because of warm fuzzy feelings generated by seasonal coffee cups, but *because we are acutely aware of Christ's presence among us* in those we minister to and those who minister to us.

⁵ Luke 5:33-34

⁶ Luke 5:30-31

⁷ Sallie McFague. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993. 162.

⁸ Matthew 25:40

Moments of incarnation

I think of the moments of incarnation, of God taking on flesh, that I have experienced in the midst of my least merry Christmases.

I remember my last conversation with my grandmother in which she assured me of her love and her confidence that I would do wonderful things with my life. I could not answer through my tears.

I remember the email I received from one of professors last year on Christmas Day:

Wherever you are, may this Christmas hold a measure of peace and joy for you, rooted in the mystery of God entering our world and with it our deepest nights. I imagine that this Christmas will not be the easiest for you, so please know that I am thinking of you.

I wonder what I will remember as moments of incarnation from this Christmas season. In what individuals or communities might I encounter God with us? I wonder what moments of incarnation you will remember from this Christmas season...

These are not always happy or pleasant moments but they are deeply joyful. The joy of Christmas, of God with us, is a paradoxical joy because it can coexist with sorrow.

Hallelujah anyway

Rushing through the food court at a mall frantically (and grudgingly) finishing up last minute Christmas errands, suddenly the woman next to you burst forth into song: "HALLELUJAH!" Next thing you know you are surrounded by people, previously undercover as ordinary shoppers, singing the Hallelujah chorus at the top of their lungs. Everyone stops to listen, to laugh, to join in. There have been several viral videos of Hallelujah Chorus flash mobs this year.⁹

Sometimes Christmas joy is like this. It bursts forth unexpectedly, catching us off guard with the thunder of timpani and soaring of sopranos. Sometimes it is not. Sometimes we may not recognize it until later. Sometimes we may not experience it at all.

But we can sing with joy anyway, not because we are *supposed* to be cheerful, not because we are denying or escaping reality, but because we hope and trust that *God is with us*. That God affirms life, in all its wholeness and brokenness, by living it among us and within us.

So we open our mouths and throw open our arms and embrace this whole mess and just say 'Hallelujah!' Hallelujah. Amen.

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXh7JR9oKVE>