

The Source of Joy
Isaiah 61:10-11
Sermon by Dan Schrock
December 27, 2020
First Sunday of Christmas: The Road to Rejoicing

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,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations. (NRSV)

I

This morning I want to speak with you about the source of our joy.

To do that, allow me to introduce Harry, who is almost never joyful. Harry is slightly imaginary, a figure pulled together with bits and pieces from the lives of many people, woven into one slightly fictional person.

Harry is one of the most miserable Mennonites you would ever want to meet. He has a lot going for him, so you might suppose he would be joyful. He's smart, well-educated, and has always had meaningful jobs that paid well. Neither he nor his family ever worries about money, because they always have so much money they can afford to be exceptionally generous. His extended family life is also rich: as a son, he loves his parents; as a brother, he is faithful to his siblings; and as a father, he is devoted to his children. Moreover, he has attended church all

his life and willingly serves on committees when asked. Given all these advantages and blessings, you would think he'd be full of joy.

Yet Harry is perpetually miserable. He is constantly stressed out by all the terrible things happening in the world. He subscribes to three or four major newspapers and magazines, and avidly reads news on the Internet. Each morning, his inbox bursts with emails from all sorts of worthwhile causes that he wants to support. Let me list the issues he is concerned about:

1. wealth disparity and poverty
2. the plight of refugees
3. unemployment
4. hunger
5. the nasty consequences of the Doctrine of Discovery
6. racism and the ongoing activity of hate groups
7. white privilege
8. the spread of Covid-19
9. providing adequate treatments for mental illness
10. Mennonite anti-Semitism
11. sexual abuse
12. child abuse
13. psychological abuse in the family and the workplace
14. rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons
15. rights for Native Americans
16. rights for persons with disabilities
17. rights for immigrants
18. rights for animals
19. global warming and climate change
20. environmental destruction caused by mining
21. becoming more intercultural
22. police violence

23. abortion
24. alcoholism, drug abuse, and addiction
25. fostering healthy marriages
26. lack of access to good water in many places around the world
27. increasing secularism, such as the rise of the Nones who have no religion
28. affordable child care
29. affordable housing
30. affordable health care
31. paying workers a living wage
32. the recent tendency toward authoritarianism in American politics
33. persuading more teenagers of his church to get baptized
34. evangelizing “the lost”
35. nuclear disarmament
36. peace building and resolving conflict
37. capital punishment
38. high levels of incarceration
39. using fair trade products
40. gang violence

That’s 40 issues rattling around in Harry’s mind! Harry believes that if he wants to follow Jesus, then he has to be a “responsible” and “up-to-date” Christian who addresses all 40 issues, plus any new issue that might come along in the future. He’s convinced the church should be concerned about every issue, that the church should advocate for every issue, that the church should act on every issue, that the church should change the world. In his ongoing effort to fix the world, Harry the Mennonite attends organizing meetings, writes letters to his senators and congressional representative, and networks with other morally earnest Christians.

As a result, Harry often feels wretched. He gets maybe 5 or 6 hours of sleep a night, because his worries about the world wake him up, twist him around in the sheets, and make it nearly impossible to get enough sleep. His face is haggard and worn; his eyes

haunted. His doctor is worried about Harry, because Harry has the classic symptoms of stress: headaches and neck aches, indigestion, muscle tension, a racing heart, exhaustion, a clenched jaw, anxiety, and high blood pressure. These signs are hardly surprising, since Harry shuffles from one day to the next carrying the weight of the world in his arms.

II

At the heart of Harry's trouble lies a problem. His problem is this: Harry has not yet made enough room for God. More specifically, he has given himself too much responsibility and has not yet given God enough responsibility. Harry acts as if it's his job to save the world. It's all up to him. He is impressed with his own importance.

Harry might benefit from greater clarity about God's areas of responsibility. Think of it like this. First, Harry did not create the world. God did. God is the one who designed the world the way it is. Of course human beings have made a mess of things. Yet God is the one who created human beings with free will, guessing that the decision to give humans free will would probably lead to war, poverty, injustice, faithlessness, and other evils. Even so, God built free will into the system, knowing it was going to cause God enormous, ongoing headaches. God freely chose this course of action; no one said God had to do it that way. Therefore God shoulders the responsibility for choosing to design the world with nearly limitless possibilities for things to go haywire.

Second, Harry did not send Jesus to be born of Mary among first century Palestinian Jews. God did that. Or to word it more carefully, Christ, the second member of the Trinity, willingly entered the world of the first century to share with us the muck and mess of this world.

Third, Harry did not send the Holy Spirit into the world. God did that. Or to word it more accurately, the Holy Spirit, who is far beyond the control of human

beings, has been active in this world from the beginning. “A Spirit from God blew over the face of the deep,” says Genesis 1, and that Spirit has never left the world. Moreover, the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke testify how active the Spirit was in the arrival and protection of Jesus. And the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost? That was merely another expression of the Spirit’s ongoing work which has been happening from the beginning of time.

Fourth, Harry will not bring about the second coming of Christ, when all manner of things shall be made right. That too is God’s responsibility. In the future God, through the agency of Christ and the Spirit, will fix all 40 issues Harry obsesses about—plus whatever other issues Harry hasn’t yet identified.

In other words, God creates, sustains, saves, and will fix the world, in ways beyond our present understanding. God is ultimately responsible for these things, not Harry, especially since God lives forever and Harry will only live for a little while, even if that little while is 90 years. God has been doing things in the world long before Harry was born, and God will continue doing things long after Harry dies. God has the long-term responsibility for this world, not Harry.

III

What then is Harry’s responsibility? That’s an excellent question. I offer you a simple yet evocative phrase: it is to cooperate with God. Harry’s joyful responsibility is to cooperate with what God wants, and with what God is doing. Harry’s call is to collaborate with what the Great Fixer has afoot in the world. Harry’s role is to say “Yes!” in word and deed.

At the end of time when God raises Harry from the dead, I imagine God might say something like this. “Harry, welcome to heaven!” I’m delighted you’ve arrived. But I have a question for you. From your point of view, when, where, and in what ways did you cooperate with me during your lifetime? I have some things I

want to say about that, but I'd like to hear you answer the question first. Go ahead; I'm listening."

IV

Friends in Christ: the fate of the world does not rest on your shoulders. Be free of that burden! This world belongs to God and is in the care of God. As Isaiah 61:11 words it, "the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations."

In a theological and spiritual sense, the source of our joy is that Christ has come—and that Christ will come again. Past, present, and future are in God's care. Our joyful, lifelong response is merely to collaborate with God's mission.