

‘Make My Joy Complete’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
December 31, 2017
based on Luke 2:22-40

Please pray with me:

Awesome and life-giving God, soften our hearts ... open our minds ... and pour into us your Holy Spirit. Guide us and inspire us. In Jesus’ name; amen.

It’s appropriate we feel a bit nostalgic on the last day of the year. We look back and reflect on the year that was. If we’re honest and optimistic we can find more good than bad ... more happy than sad ... more hopeful and less discouraging.

The Today Show last week did a video clip of famous people who died the past year. There were quite a few that surprised me. I didn’t remember about Mary Tyler Moore ... our eternal optimist.

We have lost some dear hearts ourselves this last year. Grief and sadness linger, but looking back should also bring us memories of joy.

Optimist or not, today we focus on the joy.

Watching Ken Burns’ latest documentary *Vietnam* I was reminded of those heart-wrenching scenes in the early 70’s of POW’s returning home to their families. The joy in reuniting was so touching you had to be pretty calloused not to tear up watching children fling themselves into the arms of their father’s and wives kissing their husbands.

Those years were challenging to say the least. Years of divisiveness over the war in Vietnam left our country divided and deeply wounded. Years hence it sometimes seems as though we are as divided as a nation today as we were in 1973.

Yet, I also remember those years as ones where people reacted to divisiveness in empowering ways. Women were emboldened to stand up for their rights and youth learned to educate themselves on public policy and political advocacy. (For good or for ill Hillary Clinton came out of that era where young people got involved in politics as a way of advancing a world of good.)

In looking back those years could be considered the best of times and the worst of times. Conflict and division can create a counter effect. I believe God works through conflict and division by empowering within the faithful a will and a hope.

What we need to remember while in the midst of conflict is that we are drawn to hope as a way of allaying our fears of the future. God equips us with hope and by faith we trust God’s steadfast promise to always be there for us.

Hope inspires us to believe in a future better than the one we now know. Hope allows us to trust God more than we trust ourselves and the world around us.

For us to hope for a better world to come, or to trust in a higher power to govern our lives ... is to wait with anticipation for that which we know is to come.

What happens when hope is realized? Joy! Joy happens.

Joy is hope realized.

Today we have hundreds, if not thousands, of videos on YouTube documenting the

reuniting of families when soldiers return home from the Mideast or other places of conflict.

Tears of joy are contagious and only a heartless person would not feel compassion for families who have loved ones return home from places of conflict.

Yet we are also mindful of those who did not made it home from war and that makes the joy bittersweet. For many the sadness and grief of losing a loved one who served with honor ... it is joy mixed with pain when watching others experience reunion in ways they could not.

There is a hymn in the black hymnal called 'Joy Comes with the Dawn'. The middle verse acknowledges the good times and the bad in this poetic sentiment:

Sorrow will turn, sorrow will turn into song, and God's laughter make us strong.

When joy comes with the dawn after a time of darkness, joy is hope realized when God's promise is realized ... and hope was not in vain.

The Apostle Paul writes an eloquent song of joy to the church in Philippi. He says, "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ... make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."

In other words ... oneness in Christ is the first step forward in the fulfillment of hope realized so that in Christ our joy may be complete.

Jesus was only eight days old when his parents took him to the temple for the ritual of purification as required by law.

An old man named Simeon was there in the temple. Simeon had waited for years in the sure and certain hope of the coming of the Messiah. Having been assured by the Holy Spirit he would not die before setting eyes on the Lord's Messiah, he cries with joy upon seeing the baby Jesus, praising God he says, "...my eyes have seen your salvation..."

Simeon's joy was made complete.

Similarly, Anna ... an wise and seasoned prophet who had seen a lifetime of conflict and division ... also saw the advent of salvation. You could say Anna was the first evangelist of Jesus.

Simeon and Anna had seen much in their lives and still held fast to the hope of God's coming to unite the land ... where peace and justice would prevail over conflict and division.

For Simeon and Anna, in the presentation of Jesus ... hope was fulfilled and joy was made complete.

What will it take for us to have hope realized and our joy made complete?

We don't know what 2018 will bring ... and I'm pretty sure most of us would like it to be less conflicted and divisive than 2017.

This morning there was a cartoon posted on Facebook. One person asked the other, "What do you think 2018 will bring?" The other says, "Flowers."

"How do you know that?" The answer was: "Because I'm planting flower seeds."

If we claim our faith as our primary source of strength then in many ways what 2018 brings should not worry us. If anything, 2018 should be an opportunity for us to share the hope so that when the day comes we can share together in a joy like no other.

We need to begin planting flower seeds.

By faith we know Jesus gives us the tools we need to endure any struggle; the Holy Spirit comforts us in our pain and sorrow; and God's faithful steadfast love encourages us to

continue moving forward.

Because we know Jesus lives we have the strength to endure with patience and strive for goodness and mercy while anticipating our joy to be made complete.

We live by hope ... and as we enter a new year we must trust goodness outpaces badness; that peace has the power to overwhelm conflict; and there is no badness in the world that can defeat love ... then being followers of Jesus will strengthen us for the falling and rising of many.

Jesus' way reveals a future our faith tradition refers to as a 'kingdom'. This kingdom will come at a cost. Not in dollars and cents, but in the kind of discipleship that builds up; discipleship that is grace-filled; and the kind that encourages us to be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind ... as Christ.

Our own reunion with Christ is like the reunion with loved ones distanced by conflict. Joy is the order of the day.

Then we can praise God that by grace our joy is made complete.

Amen.