

Isaiah 55:6-13
Sorrow/Joy
WRCoB 12.12.21

I begin with an illustration from
From the website www.fullerstudio.fuller.edu.

Lacey Lanier is a nurse at Children's Hospital Los Angeles's Newborn and Infant Critical Care Unit (NICCU).

For every 12-hour shift, newborns with health problems requiring around-the-clock observation and care are entrusted to her. When Lacey scrubs in, she knows she will be caring for babies fighting for their lives.

Every cuddle, every diaper changed, is a piece of her heart invested in these newborns, which deepens the ache of witnessing their pain. "I struggle with why God would let this happen. You can't make sense of the suffering of babies."

Opening up her heart to the babies makes bearing witness to their struggle all the more devastating. Yet she feels more certain than ever that her calling is to be a NICCU nurse. And amidst all the pain, Lacey explains, there are also moments of tremendous joy

As a NICCU nurse, Lacey lives in the both/and reality of our world: sorrow and joy, suffering and hope. It's a delicate balancing act that requires her to hold on to hope while also remaining cognizant of her patients' very real health challenges.

For Lacey, connecting with the babies, knowing the reality of potential heartbreak, is what it means for her work to be missional. “I would not have these moments in any other profession. There is so much depth in the world of the NICCU—depth of sorrow and depth of joy.”

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The theme for this 3rd Sunday in Advent is Joy.

There’s a reason why a Bible concordance

The book listing all the words in the Bible

Lists JOY more than 200 times

While listing HAPPY or HAPPINESS a mere 90 times.

Because even though we tend to interchange the words

There is a big difference in meaning.

Happiness is a fleeting emotion.

Its experience needs to be fed

Because happiness depends on factors outside of us.

Like people, things, places, or events.

We remain happy

As long as those particular external circumstances last.

Joy, on the other hand, is not that way.

It is not fleeting

It is not based on external factors.

It is an internal experience rooted in the Spirit.

It is not dependent on happiness.

As Lacey Lanier learned as a NICU nurse
One can experience joy even in the midst of sorrow.

It's that feeling you experience
When a loved one has died.

An experience of a deep sorrow
And yet, mixed up in all that sorrow
An experience of joy for the love shared.

Kahlil Gibran wrote in his book, *The Prophet*

"Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."

But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

And as Tennyson wrote

*'Tis better to have loved and lost
than never to have loved at all.*

It is with this in mind
That we approach our Scripture Lesson today.

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Our reading is part of what is called *The Book of Comfort*.

Others call Second Isaiah due to the differences
Between the earlier chapters and these chapters.

It begins in chapter 40 and ends with chapter 55.

In the *Book of Comfort*

Isaiah addresses the exiles in their suffering
With God's promise of deliverance.

It is no longer words of judgment and condemnation
But words of comfort and rescue.

He reassures the people of Israel
That God is still in the business of redemption.

God still controls history.

And despite their present circumstances
God will once again demonstrate his power.

Soon, there will be a second exodus
Far more glorious than the first.

To those who seek the Lord
To those who call upon his name
To those who repent
God will save.

As the rain and snow replenishes moisture in dry land
So, will God's blessings shower down upon them.

All nature will celebrate their deliverance
And rejoice in the power and the majesty of God.

The mountains will burst into song
The trees will clap their hands.

It is beautiful, poetic imagery.

It is in the midst of their exilic suffering
Isaiah proclaims God's promises.

Their long-suffering will end and turn into
A creation-wide celebration of joy.

In the midst of suffering comes joy.

It came when the Hebrew people were liberated
From their enslavement in Egypt.

It came when Cyrus allowed the Jews
To return to their homeland after their exile in Babylon.

It came to America with the Emancipation Proclamation
Freeing the enslaved African Americans.

It came when the Allied forces
Liberated the Jews from the concentration camps.

And it comes to each of us
When we are delivered from the bondages of sin
Through Christ our Deliverer.

The deep joy that comes in our relationship to God.

Deep joy follows on the heels of great sorrow
And will carry us through the sorrows of tomorrow.

Kahlil Gibran also said, "*The deeper that sorrow carves into
your being, the more joy you can contain.*"

Sorrow and joy walk hand-in-hand.

And no more so, than in the story of Jesus.

While the shepherds watched their flocks by night
On that fateful night when Christ was born
An angel said to them.

Luke 2:10 KJV Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

And yet, this same Isaiah
Who wrote our passage today
Describes our Deliverer this way.

**Isaiah 53:3 NLT He was despised and rejected—
a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.**

Mary, the mother of Jesus felt great joy
When the angel informed her
That she would conceive and bear a son.

He would be the Savior of the world.

And yet, after the birth of Jesus
Simeon, upon seeing Jesus, praised God
For joy filled his heart
Upon seeing the Christ-child.

But he turned to Mary and warned her

**Luke 2:35 CEV . . . and you, Mary, will suffer as though
you had been stabbed by a dagger.**

The Apostle Paul, who wrote so much
Concerning the great joy of salvation
Was also quick to say.

Romans 5:3-5 CEV But that's not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. ⁴ And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope ⁵ that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love.

And so too, as followers of Jesus Christ
We, rejoice in his coming in the form of a babe
For his life on earth
His ministry of healing
And for his atoning death.

But hand-in-hand with that experience
There is a deep sorrow that envelops us
In our relationship to him.

We realize it was his death that sets us free.

You can't embrace the gospel message
Without the hauntingly, beautiful awareness
That it is through his death we live.

Isaiah 53:4-5 NLT

⁴Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! ⁵But he was pierced for our rebellion,

crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.

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In my early years of my ministry
I often became emotional.

I still do at times.

Times when I sat next to a family member
As their loved one took their final breath.

Or the time I took a mother in to see her son
Who lay on a gurney in MCV's ER
Dead from a self-inflicted gunshot to the head.

All those times I have sat with the grieving
As part of my pastoral ministry.

A deep sadness would swell up within me
As I ministered to the bereaved
I would have to fight back the tears.

Memories of those occasions fill me with sorrow.

And yet, those are the moments
That are the most meaningful

Joy would well up within me
Making me keenly aware of God's presence.

Victor Hugo writes

Joy's smile is much closer to tears than it is to laughter.

Linson Daniel, in an article on the website

www.fullerstudio.fuller.edu

Explains it better than me.

In the sorrow, there is a glimmer of something that is hard to explain. It is a feeling that is both far away and very present.

It is both overwhelming and hard to pinpoint. It is not happiness. It is akin to peace, but it is not that either.

It is deeper and more encompassing than both. It seems to be an unexplainable, deep sense of goodness and hope. It is joy.

He describes the sense of joy as an unexpected visitor.

The fruit of God's work in our lives. It is connected to the person and character of God. Therefore, joy is present in our deepest sorrow and grief. It is the fragrance of Immanuel—God with us.

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Like the people in exile
Waiting for God's deliverance

The Season of Advent waits for the promise
That Joy will be our portion.

God is not done!

The mountains will burst forth in song!

It is in Advent

We anticipate the arrival of Jesus

Who comes in the midst of our sorrow

And fills us with a joy the world cannot give

Nor can it take away.

Let the mountains burst forth in song!