

The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 24, 2010

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

The Grinch stole Christmas. He took everything that would have made me happy as a child. He took the roast beast. I look forward to roast beast at Christmas. I still do now that I am older. In fact the roast beast has become more important as I age than the presents under the tree. The Grinch took the Christmas presents also. He took things that would make boys and girls happy. In fact the presents that I opened as a small child made me so happy that I still drag them with me today. I have games that I received for Christmas when I was little. I drug them to Kansas. And even though I never played with them in Kansas, I drug them to Illinois. They are in the basement. I don't play with them, but I won't part with them either because of the joy they brought me when I was little. The Grinch took all of that. He took all of the decorations that make Christmas look different than the other times of the year. He took everything that would make anyone joyful at Christmas. He took all of these things away from the Whos in Whoville.

And yet as the cartoon shows it, the Whos in Whoville got up the next morning and went to the town square and still began to sing. They still had joy.

It was a simple cartoon. I know that Jim Carrey's movie does a psychological analysis of the Grinch and that is fine, but the cartoon is simpler. Is it simple minded? If someone broke into your house and took all of your things, would you still go to the square and sing? When the police are there and your personal things are gone and you don't know whether or not the house is safe anymore, would you sing? Can you sing? It takes strength to sing. People just don't go around singing. It takes strength to do it. Is the cartoon just simple minded? Is it a victim of Pollyannaism?

There was a young man who dated a girl for a year and a half. They considered marriage. They were of the right age. They were in college. They loved each other. But when the boy went to look for wedding rings in order to propose to the girl, he could not bring himself to purchase one. He told himself it was the money, but if you love a girl, the money should not matter. What it really was was the fact that his values were very different from hers. He anticipated arguments about God and about how to raise the children. He knew it would not work. He did not want to put her or himself through a divorce. So he broke up with her. To married people it seems like a small thing to do. He'll get over it. But when you have never dated someone for so long before it is trauma. This young man had no point of comparison. He had no way to tell what was happening to him. He felt terrible. He felt lonely. Now all of their mutual friends had to make up their minds what they were going to do. He was campaigning hard to keep all of his friends, but all he noticed was how hard she was campaigning to keep that same group of friends with her. What would happen if they all picked her over him? Would anyone be his friend? This is important at college. It is not like Mom and Dad are around to listen and to love.

He went to church. Before service he sat in the pew and tried to pray. It is hard to pray when you are distracted. He stared at the altar and eventually realized, "Well, Lord, at least I still have you."

Upon what basis did that young man come to that conclusion? What gave him the right to say that? Isn't the Lord with the girl also? How can this young man say in the face of his loneliness that God is with him? Is it simple that the Lord is with everyone? If that is the case we would have to say that the Lord is with Saddam Hussein. The Lord is with those people who are scamming us and taking our money, claiming that it will go to Haitian relief efforts.

How do you know the Lord is with you? Or more better put what to do you when you have no one? What do you do when you experience the wrath of God? What do you do when in your life you get a little taste of His anger?

The ground is cursed because of Adam's sin. Genesis puts it in simple terms that are straightforward and deal with only a few issues. Romans chapter 8 brings out the full significance of the curse of the ground which resulted from Adam's sin. The universe, the entire universe, was subjected to decay.

The end result of such decay is death. Therefore the world is broken in a profound way. We have broken it. Our sins have broken it. God has cursed the ground because of our disobedience. The result of such cursing is the decay to which the universe is subjected. This decay takes a variety of forms. It may result in the blindness that some people experience. It may result in the prejudice that some people experience. It may result in an accident that we endure. It may result in the loss of our home or property. It may result in our poverty. It may result in large things. Tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, floods are all dramatic manifestations that the world is broken. Small things like mosquito bites and weeds are smaller reminders of how the universe is broken. The possibilities of large things going wrong, like global warming or an asteroid striking the planet are larger possibilities of things that could really drastically go awry.

All of these things have to do with death. People die as the result of disease. People die as a result of natural disasters. Lots of them die in earthquakes, we have seen. People die as a result of prejudice. People die as a result of poverty, another thing that Haiti has illustrated for us. People die as a result of diseases. People die because the world is broken. God has subjected it to decay when He cursed the ground because of us.

Any experience of these things is an experience of the judgment of God. The Whos things were stolen. God could have stopped the Grinch, but the world is subject to decay and so the Grinch gets to steal the things of others. The breakup of a long standing relationship, my land if we were all still in fellowship with God there would be no differences in values that would lead to the end of a relationship that two people found precious. But since the world is in decay we don't agree with each other. Our disagreements lead to pain, either violence, or something less dramatic like a break up of two people who love each other.

All of these things are the judgments of God. How do the Whovilles sing in the face of God's judgment? How does this young man still believe that the Lord is with him in spite of what he has been through? Surely all indications are that God hates him. Surely all indications are that something is miserably wrong with Whoville.

Or put it another way. I knew a woman once who was paralyzed from Multiple Sclerosis. Her disease had progressed so far that she could no longer move her arms or her legs. Other people had to move them for her. She could barely talk. She could not move her head.

She requested that flowers that people sent her be placed next to her head so that she could see them and enjoy them. She had all of the walls of her nursing home room filled with things to look at. She enjoyed the birds outside her window and the clouds that floated past on summer days. She had joy.

People would refer to her and tell me how sad it was. But she was not sad. They would feel sorry for her, but she did not feel sorry for herself. From whence does such power come? From whence does such joy come?

It comes from the joy of the Lord.

The Lord rejoiced over her. The Lord had joy at the thought of her. The joy of the Lord was her strength.

The Lord rejoices over you. The Lord has joy at the thought of you. The joy of the Lord is your strength. So do not weep and do not mourn over yourselves. Do not mourn over your situation. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

In the face of God's judgments you must place His joy. The only way to overcome God is with God. The only way to fight God is with God Himself. God makes this available as soon as He has joy over you.

The joy of God is expressed in what He is willing to give for what causes Him joy. He is willing to give His own Son and the Son is willing to be given. "Not My will, but Yours be done." For the joy that was set before Him Jesus endured the cross scorning its shame. The joy that was set before Jesus was you. You are the reason that He endured the cross scorning its shame. Oh, I understand that it's too bad that He had to do it, but I also understand that He willingly did it! He did it because of joy!

If the joy of the Lord is expressed to us in the crucifixion of His Son, then as long as Jesus remains crucified the Lord has joy over us. When I say that as long as Jesus remains crucified, I am not suggesting that Jesus is still hanging on the cross. I am also not suggesting that Jesus is still dead. What I am saying is that He still bears the marks. At the resurrection you will be able to look at His hands and His side and realize just how much joy He must have experienced over you in order to endure all of that for you.

Since Jesus still bears those marks, He has joy over you and so does His Father in heaven. When you experience the judgments of God in your life, be sure to remind God of the joy that He has over you also. Remind God that He sent His Son. His Son died for you. He did it for joy's sake. Remind God that He rejoices over you. As a groom rejoices over His new bride, so the Lord rejoices over you. Remind God of that in the face of His judgments.

In so doing you will have God with you. In spite of the loneliness, He is with you. In spite of the sickness, healing is with you. In spite of the devastation, aid is with you. In spite of your death, resurrection is with you.

So do not weep. Do not mourn over yourselves. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.