

2020 12 13 – Joy in the Shadows

Psalm 126 (The Inclusive Bible)

When YHWH brought us captives back to Zion,
We thought we were dreaming!
Our mouths were filled with laughter then,
Our tongues with songs of joy.

The people of Israel had lived in exile in Babylon for several decades and now some of them had arrived back home. Those who returned were the children and grandchildren of the ones who had left. As they were growing up in a foreign country, they had heard stories about Judah, their homeland, stories of abundant crops, festivals and pilgrimages to the holy temple in Jerusalem. Then a man named Cyrus became the King of Persia and he sent the Israelites back home with gifts of gold. Their hearts were filled with joy as they settled each family in their own hometown. (Ezra chapters 1 & 2)

But life was difficult for the returning exiles. They were working hard to create new lives in this land which was both familiar and foreign at the same time. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed during the war and rebuilding it required labour and money at a time when both were scarce. And the people who had remained in Judah were doing everything they could to hinder the progress of those who had just arrived.

It didn't take long before the joy-filled celebrations of their return were long-ago memories and the people were once again praying to their God for salvation:

Now set our captive hearts free, YHWH!
Make them like streams in the driest desert
Then those who sow in tears
will reap with shouts of joy

In the book of Ezra there's a story about a gathering that took place in Jerusalem two years after the first exiles returned home. The rebuilding of the temple had begun and a new foundation had just been laid. The story says that there were shouts of joy as this important step was completed and at the very same time there were those who wept with a loud voice. The people who were weeping remembered the temple as it had been and they knew that it would never be the same again. (Ezra 3:10-13)

We have all been living in a form of exile during these past nine months and now our deliverance is at hand. We have the promise of a vaccine. I know that my heart leapt with joy yesterday, when they announced that the first doses were on their way across the ocean to Canada. Like the Israelites we have reason to celebrate. We have reason to believe that our lives will be returning to some kind of normal soon.

But, like the Israelites, our return will not be easy and it's not clear what that "new normal" will look like. For now, most of us are facing a quiet Christmas without the usual family celebrations. We have been told that the vaccine will arrive gradually and will be administered over most of the next year. So our need to wear masks, to physical distance, to self-isolate is not going away any time soon. And we wonder what the lasting effects of this pandemic will be.

So what does joy look like during this gradual, no doubt difficult, return from exile? I think the best way to talk about joy in this time is to share another story. It's called *Joy in the Shadows* and it is from the December issue of the *Broadview* magazine. The author is Julie McGonegal and, in this story, she recalls her own childhood. She writes:

Christmas was never celebrated with any great fanfare in my house. My dad lost his mother at a young age to addiction and was then sent on a train from Toronto to Timiskaming, Ont., to become an unwanted addition to his aunt's household. So, he's never had much of a sense of family. As the season of lights rolls around each year, he enters his own season of darkness and depression.

In his younger years, his coping mechanism for getting through all the forced joy and conviviality was something from a bottle. Then, as a recovering alcoholic, he learned to numb his sadness with never-ending work.

Julie went on to explain that at Christmas:

Dad was there in the periphery, trying, not very successfully, to keep his dark shadow from looming over us. After coming out for the present opening, he'd retreat back to the bedroom for a mid-afternoon nap, usually with a newspaper in hand...

But that all changed sometime in my teens. Dad became super involved in Alcoholics Anonymous, sponsoring men whose drinking had destroyed their lives, taking families, jobs, everything. With their kind, haggard faces, these men were welcomed into our home every holiday. For them, Dad would get out of bed and join them on our flowered chesterfield for long, sincere chats, and his face would light up with good cheer in a way we hadn't seen in Christmases past.

Of all the men who joined us at Christmas time, it's Steve I remember best. After battling alcoholism for years and finally staying sober, Steve was diagnosed with cancer. It was all though his liver, and he had only a few months to live. Looking at his gaunt face that Christmas, we all knew it. My younger brother Josh, who had his own diagnosis of brain cancer and was puffy and bald from the chemotherapy, sat with Steve on that old chesterfield of ours, but somehow the air was more festive than sombre.

Steve had his son with him, a boy of about 14 or 15, roughly the same age as my brother. For years, his son had stayed away. For years, he hadn't spoken to his father. That year, his son was there. And the love between father and son was palpable.

I'd heard people say that joy is never far from suffering, but until then I hadn't really understood what it meant. That Christmas, I got it. Joy was present. It was there in some vague, hard-to-define way — in the looks

people exchanged and the laughter they shared. Steve would die in the spring. But it's that Christmas, not the news of his death, that I remember.

(Broadview December 2020, pages 26-27.)

As a teenager Julie McGonegal came to understand the difference between joy and happiness. She realized that joy is possible even in the midst of pain and sorrow. And I'm sure this year, she understands why, in the midst of a pandemic, there are more Christmas decorations lighting up our homes and why the local post office is running out of books of stamps.

Yes, it is possible to feel both joy and sorrow at the same time. Yes, it possible to celebrate and to mourn on the same day. Yes, it is possible to feel the joy of Christmas in the midst of a pandemic. Joy is possible in the shadows and even in the dark.