

The Promise of Joy

A Sermon Delivered on December 23, 2018
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”*

-- Hebrews 13:2

Unitarian Universalist Church
of the Monterey Peninsula
490 Aguajito Road
Carmel, CA 93923
(831) 624-7404
www.uucmp.org

Meditation: by the 13th century Persian poet, Jelaluddin Rumi, a poem entitled “The Guest House.”

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
[They] may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

First Reading: Our first reading is from *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, which is based on a series of conversations between the South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as recounted by the author and editor Douglas Adams. The conversations took place when the Archbishop traveled to Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama’s home in northern India and seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile, to celebrate the Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday. This passage begins with words of Archbishop Tutu (p. 11):

“We are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy,” the Archbishop said as I handed him his sleek black cane with the silver handle shaped like a greyhound. “Life is filled with challenges and adversity,” [he] continued. “Fear is inevitable, as is pain and eventually death. Take the return of the prostate cancer – well, it does focus the mind.”

One of the side effects of the medicine the Archbishop was taking is fatigue, and he had slept for most of the flight to India, a beige blanket pulled up over his head. We had planned to talk on the flight, but sleep was more important, and now he was trying to share his thoughts quickly as we approached Dharamsala...

“Discovering more joy does not, I’m sorry to say,” [he] added, as we began our descent, “save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily, too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being heartbroken.”

Second Reading: Our second reading is a poem by former poet laureate Billy Collins entitled “Questions about Angels.”

Of all the questions you might want to ask
about angels, the only one you ever hear
is how many can dance on the head of a pin.

No curiosity about how they pass the eternal time
besides circling the Throne chanting in Latin
or delivering a crust of bread to a hermit on earth
or guiding a boy and girl across a rickety wooden bridge.

Do they fly through God's body and come out singing?
Do they swing like children from the hinges
of the spirit world saying their names backwards and forwards?
Do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?

What about their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,
their diet of unfiltered divine light?
What goes on inside their luminous heads? Is there a wall
these tall presences can look over and see hell?

If an angel fell off a cloud, would [she] leave a hole
in a river and would the hole float along endlessly
filled with the silent letters of every angelic word?

If an angel delivered the mail, would he arrive
in a blinding rush of wings or would he just assume
the appearance of the regular mailman and
whistle up the driveway reading the postcards?

No, the medieval theologians control the court.
The only question you ever hear is about
the little dance floor on the head of a pin
where halos are meant to converge and drift invisibly.

It is designed to make us think in millions,
billions, to make us run out of numbers and collapse
into infinity, but perhaps the answer is simply one:
one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet,
a small jazz combo working in the background.

She sways like a branch in the wind, her beautiful
eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over
to glance at his watch because she has been dancing
forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.

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“I bring you good tidings of great joy.” This is what the angel said to the shepherds tending their sheep that fateful night outside Bethlehem. “Good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people,” the angel said. And this shall be a sign to you: “a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger...”

These are the familiar words from the Christmas story, as translated into English for King James in the 1600s.

When I was a child and heard this story year after year, I always wondered what the shepherds actually saw and heard that night, as the kept watch over their flock. What did the angel, what did the heavenly host look like. It must have been something... and scary – they were “sore afraid.”

Two years ago, when Elaine and I visited the Holy Land, we stayed at a hotel in Bethlehem. Bethlehem, it turns out, is just five miles outside Jerusalem. I was able to see the hills outside Bethlehem with my own eyes. We even visited the actual Shepherds’ Field. It was just down the road from our hotel.

This is what it looked like.



I learned the Shepherds’ Field has been under Franciscan custody since 1217, when Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals, made it his task to guard “the grace of ...Holy Places.”

This is what the hills of Bethlehem look like.



The Shepherds' Field is under Christian custody, but – like Bethlehem - is located in the Palestinian West Bank. We could see Jewish settlements on hilltops nearby, and Jerusalem in the distance, all of which are contested territories occupied by Israel. ...It's complicated.

Today there is a Catholic chapel at the exact spot the angels announced the birth of Jesus. (that's our Palestinian guide, Da'ud.). And this is how an artist today imagines the angel.



But, of course, this isn't the only way we can imagine angels.

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In Jewish and Christian scriptures, angels are first mentioned in the Book of Genesis. They don't descend from heaven, they don't have wings – they look like regular people, like travelers passing through, they are simply messengers. “Messenger” is what the word “angel” means, translated from the Greek. Three of them came to Abraham when his tent was pitched by the oaks of Mambre. Abraham warmly welcomed them, washed their feet, offered food and drink. As it turned out, one of the three was Yahweh himself, with two angel attendants. The message God conveyed to Abraham, was that his wife would soon have a child.

The author Sophy Burnham studies angels. She calls them “winged spirits,” and has found that they are part of the mystery of every culture. The Vikings called them *Valkyries*. The Greeks called them *horea*. The Persians called them *fereshta*.

She writes,

“There are angels in Zoroastrianism, in Buddhism, in Taoism. There were angels in ancient Assyrian and Mesopotamian thought, and the belief in angels carried down through Manichaeism, Judaic, Christian, and Islamic lore, all seeding one another’s faiths. Shamanistic practices have their own intercourse with winged beings, though often they come in the form of eagles or ravens or spirits that we don’t associate with angels.” (*A Book of Angels*, p. 19)

She writes:

“It is said that angels come as thoughts, as visions, as dreams, as animals, as the light on the water or in clouds and rainbows, and as people too. Are they walking on this earth as people in disguise? Or do they appear for [just] one moment and vanish into ether again? Or is it really us, mere humans, who for a moment are picked up by the hand of God and made to speak unwittingly the words another needs to hear, or to hold out a lifeline to another soul?” (p.28)

* * *

What do angels look like? Do they look like children swinging from the hinges of the spirit world, or sitting alone in little gardens changing colors? Do they look like a dancer in stocking feet with her eyes closed, swaying like a branch in the wind, or like a tall bass player looking at his watch?

Around here, angels can come in many shapes, maybe even in the form of a Great White Egret. Bob (our Worship Associate this morning) spoke of a time when his spirit was at rock bottom, when the sky was grey and everything looked grim and flat. It was the surprising sight of a Great White Egret rising from the flotsam that lifted Bob’s spirit. The experience of this beautiful bird, swooping close by - close enough to hear its feathers glide through the air - felt like an angelic visitation. And his spirit was renewed.

Have you ever been in a place of spiritual darkness? Have you had days when the world seemed bleak, when your thoughts were gloomy, your heart as heavy as a rock? What was it that lifted you out of the gloom?... Kind words from a friend? The sight of a starry night? A warm memory? A favorite song?

Sophy Burnham writes:

“Look: we know nothing about angels. We do not know what angels are or whether they stand in hierarchies in the skies... We know nothing of this other realm, except that we are given brief, fleeting glimpses in our hearts. We hear its singing in lost memories. We see it at the edge of our eye, but so ephemerally that when we turn to face it, it’s already gone. We feel it in our loneliness, the hollow hole at the heart that we try to fill with physical pleasures or danger or drugs or alcohol or war or

work or love... It is the existential longing for surcease that makes us believe that something other must exist; for if we remembered nothing, if we had no sense of having once been filled, would we now recognize our present emptiness?" (p. 21)

* * *

When our hearts are full, when our spirits soar – what we feel is joy.

Joy has the power to transform us. Its effects are tangible and very real. According to psychologists who study the subject, the experience of “joy widens one’s view of the world and expands imaginative thought. It activates. It makes both physical and intellectual exploration more likely.... Through its positive energies, it heals as well. One joy, the Chinese [saying goes], scatters a hundred griefs, and certainly it can be antidote to fatigue and discouragement. Into those set back by failure, joy transfuses hope.”
(*Exuberance: The Passion for Life*, by Kay Redfield Jamison, p. 7)

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When Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama met in Dharamsala, they spoke at great length about their understanding of joy. The Dalai Lama was 80 years old, and the Archbishop was 84. Each of them had lived long lives filled with plenty of pain and turmoil. But despite their struggles, they both had found ways to gain a sense of peace, courage, and joy.

They agreed that – no matter what the circumstances of our lives may be - we have the capacity to cultivate joy. We can engage in practices that help us move through the darkest times of our lives and back into the light.

The two most essential qualities of the heart that allow us to be more joyful, they both agreed are compassion and gratitude. And the first step in cultivating greater compassion and gratitude, they say, is to shift our perspective.

The Dalai Lama says, “For every event in life there are many different angles. When you look at the same event from a wider perspective, your sense of worry and anxiety reduces, and you have greater joy.” No matter what happens in our lives, we can always choose how to look at it.

As the psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky put it, our experience of joy is shaped by our ability reframe our situation more positively. “A healthy perspective really is the foundation of joy and happiness, because the way we see the world is the way we experience the world. Changing the way we see the world in turn changes the way we feel and the way we act, which changes the world itself.” (p. 194)

Or as Archbishop Tutu explained:

“I have sometimes said to people, when you are stuck in a traffic jam, you can deal with it in one of two ways. You can let the frustration eat you up. Or you can look

around at the other drivers [and think about what might be going on in their lives] and see that one might have a wife who has pancreatic cancer. It doesn't matter if you don't know exactly what they might have, but you know they are all suffering with worries and fears because they are human. And you can lift them up and bless them. You can say, Please, God, give each one of them what they need... The very fact of not thinking about your own frustration and pain does something. I don't know why. But it will make you feel much better." (p. 198)

Fundamentally both the Archbishop and the Dalai Lama were making the case that we need to shift our perspective from *I* and *me* and *mine*, to *we* and *us* and *ours*.

* * *

We are fragile creatures. Life is filled with its share of challenges. We find joy not despite our weaknesses, but because of them. But we must make the effort to look.

If we look closely we may find that life's greatest blessings and life's most beautiful moments arise from darkness. Like the breathtaking beauty of a Great White Egret that's most apparent when surrounded by dark.

Our lives are filled with unexpected arrivals: A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. We should be grateful for whatever comes, because each has been sent as a guide, as a messenger from beyond.

* * *

As the story goes, it was during the darkest nights of the year, the shepherds tended their sheep outside Bethlehem, and an angel appeared bringing good tidings of great joy.

We don't need to speculate about what the shepherds saw long, long ago. We can open our eyes today – look around... (the people around you, friends, strangers, the natural world.) Wherever we turn, we can find angels. We don't need to travel halfway around the world to find holy places. The earth right beneath our feet is holy land. Babies are born every day, and each and every one of them is a miracle.

During the dark days ahead,
May we dare to change the way we see the world,
So we might change the way we feel and the way we act,
And each in our own small way change the world itself.
In this way, may we be the messengers
who bring joy to the world.

Amen.