

Isaiah 9: 1-7
Hebrews 12: 1-12
October 9, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

A number of years ago I finally consented to let the dentist pull my upper wisdom teeth. For decades dentists in several states had pled with me to have them removed. Since there was no problem, I resisted. Well, one day the dentist saw some decay and I finally relented. The day came. The teeth were removed. When the procedure was over, much to the consternation of the dentist, I burst into tears. "Are you ok?" "Are you in pain?"

The fact was: I was not in pain. These were tears of *joy!* Let me explain.

For years I had been aware of these teeth. Every day they reminded me that they were serving no useful purpose in my mouth. Sooner or later they could become infected. So when they came out, several decades of suppressed fearful anticipation came pouring out in a torrent of relief and yes, *joy!*

Joy has very little to do with the worldly experience of happiness. Happiness carries the sense of good fortune, cheerfulness. It is associated with the experience of pleasure and unexpected good luck.

Joy on the other hand, in its biblical sense denotes a profound experience which is as disturbing as it is wonderful. It is most often identified with the intervention of divine power into a human life. It is associated with deliverance from fear and despair. It typically describes the experience of release from powerlessness, hopelessness. Joy is the response when we experience God doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

The word translated “joy” in the passage we heard from Hebrews is related to another Greek word which is usually translated “grace.” Grace is the act of God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. So this morning we might say that *grace is the act* by which we are delivered. Joy is our *response*.

And yet real joy is not simply the response to a wonderful deliverance. It is more than the tears of a relieved dental patient when his wisdom teeth were extracted once and for all. Biblical joy is an attitude of the soul even in the midst of distress and dread.

The writer of Hebrews exhorts his hearers to:

(Look) to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who *for the joy that was set before him endured the cross* disregarding its shame, who is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider *him* who endured such hostility... so that *you* do not grow weary and lose heart.

Notice that joy is not a response to a *completed* event. In this case it is the anticipation of joy that empowers Jesus to enter into the suffering of crucifixion. It is his conviction that the outcome of obedience to God by submitting to death will be *life*, not only for him but for all humanity, that allows him to endure.

You can see that at the heart of Jesus’ obedience is an act of deep faith and trust in God. This same writer defines faith as, “the assurance of what we hope for, the conviction of what we do not see.”(11:1) In entering into the suffering of the cross, Jesus has no guarantees that he will rise from the dead. He has faith in the God who promised his resurrection. Indeed if you read the Gospels there is no place where God says to Jesus, “Don’t worry. I will raise you from the dead. All will be well.” Somewhere deeply embedded in the heart of Jesus is this abiding faith in an outcome he cannot see with certainty. Yet by faith he received the conviction and

assurance of “the joy” that was set before him. And it was this that allowed him to endure the agony of abandonment, rejection and brutally painful death. The joy of Easter morning is the vindication of Jesus’ faith and trust in God and the realization of the joy that had been set before him. Jesus has experienced the fact that God has been with him all the way. Jesus experiences God’s *zeal*, God’s yearning, God’s passionate love for Jesus and for all humanity. In short, through the disturbing anguish of the crucifixion and the power of the resurrection Jesus discovers in fact what he had known by faith: *God is passionate about God’s people!* God is not satisfied to provide mere worldly happiness; God wants his people to experience *joy*. God wants human beings to be inspired by the same joy that inspired Jesus so that we can endure all suffering and not be overcome.

Why is this such good news to you and me?

First of all, it is good news because it affirms a big part of our reality base. Life is scary. Life is hard and painful, disappointing, unfair, unjust, full of suffering and the possibility of terrifying events. Who of us this morning has not faced situations where we could see no happy outcome? I don’t know for a fact, but I suspect that there are some of you today who right now know what I am talking about.

So, isn’t it good news to know that from Jesus’ point of view joy is the outcome of your struggles? Joy is the destiny of even the most apparently hopeless of events. Take a moment and reflect on the real troubles of your life—the ones where there appears to be no good outcome. How does it feel to be in that empty and hopeless space? Now take that same situation and bring to it the belief that there is life at the end of the ordeal. All will be well. You are safe in the hands of a loving God who has not and never will abandon you? Is there not a

lifting of the anxiety, a lightening of the weight upon your soul? Is there not the beginning of a sense that, one day at a time with god's help you can move through the suffering. Do you not begin to see, like the light of a lighthouse to a boat in distress, the light of hope that you will not be destroyed? You will not be abandoned. Moreover even now you are safe. Even now, when the bill collectors are calling, when the pink slip has come or appears to be coming, when the very foundation of security appears to be crumbling with seismic power—*even now can you not begin to claim it is well with my soul?*

In her amazing study of the Book of Genesis, [The Beginning of Desire](#), Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg quotes Rainer Maria Rilke: "Did you know then, that joy is, in reality, a terror whose outcome we don't fear?" Joy is a terror whose outcome we do not fear! For Jesus abandonment torture and death was a terror he did not fear. It was terror in all its cruelty. It was for Jesus a felt reality. But because of the joy that was set before him, the terror ultimately had no power to pull him from God and his obedience to God's path for him.

This I propose to you is true joy. It is the trust that although all the outward circumstances of life may be grim, hopeless and terrifying we are safe, we can have peace; we can know the joy that our true destiny is a joy beyond all human imagining. We have but to do one thing, look to Jesus who as pioneer has gone before us and blazed a trail. We have but to look to Jesus who takes our fragile and incomplete faith *and perfects it*. That is he supplies the faith we lack. He supplies the trust we lack. He meets us where we are and supplies all of our deficiencies. We need to look to him with eyes and hearts of faith.

We are called to be a community which points all who come to look to Jesus. Amen.