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## The Surprise of Gladness

Isaiah 35:1-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 15, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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Through the numerous memorial events this past week focusing on the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela, I've been struck by a particular expression on Nelson Mandela's face that appears to be prominent in many visual images of him, and that is, his smile. During Duke Chapel's vigil in honor of Mr. Mandela this past Tuesday evening, I sat in the wooden pew, four rows back, on this side of the Chapel. An easel with an original presidential campaign poster—the green, black, and yellow poster with a picture of Mr. Mandela from 1994 with the heading “Mandela for President”—was placed right in front of me. If I looked slightly left and up, I could see his face with that smile. It's not as if that was his only facial expression throughout his life, just as we don't walk around with a smile plastered on our face all day long. But it's an expression that stands out in my memory about him. How could he smile with all that he endured, including 27 years in prison? How could a man in his situation say, “If there are dreams about a beautiful South Africa, there are also roads that lead to their goal. Two of these roads could be named Goodness and Forgiveness.” We may expect varied reactions to imprisonment and a situation of apartheid and dehumanizing oppression. But a smile? A smile may surprise us in this kind of setting.

Not everyone likes surprises either. Surprises can shock or bewilder or numb or even frighten. For a people, as in Isaiah, “who are of a fearful heart,” surprises may only further feed their fear. Literally, “fearful heart” means hearts that are racing (Anathea Portier-Young), beating with anxiety, affecting their whole being. In our anxiety-driven, pill-popping culture, we understand this, which is why the prophetic preacher is told to tell the fearful people, “be strong, do not fear!” Fear can kill your joy. But we shouldn't be surprised by Israel's fear. They've endured exile. They were cut down to the size of a stump. Dominated by other peoples. Dispersed to other lands. No longer clothed in majesty. Just wrapped in fear. Their fear is no surprise after being overpowered by other superpowers and becoming refugees seeking aid at the borders of God's love. Smiling was the last thing on their mind.

In a severely impoverished community, in one of the largest slums in Nairobi, Kenya, the Shangalia orphanage is a beacon and bridge of hope for former street children. They take homeless kids off the street, give them a place to sleep, and an education. It's an all-inclusive ministry. On one side of the small courtyard are the sleeping quarters, rooms packed with rows of metal bunk beds from the floor up to the ceiling. On the other side of the courtyard are the classrooms where they learn basic subjects like language arts, math, and science. I was there with a group of pastors from Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. We sat in the courtyard as the children recited scripture, sang religious and cultural songs, played instruments, danced and performed other acrobatic tricks. The children repeated a phrase we hear in churches throughout the world—“God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is good.” Over and over and over again, “God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is good.” They said this on their own volition. They smiled. They clapped. They were glad, not sad. They had every reason to be sad, even mad or fearful, due to the socioeconomic and political context.

One might say they had nothing but it seemed as if they had everything. It wasn't the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or the person whose just been named to a high-powered political position or anyone else who appeared to be successful financially. We know all too well that having much material wealth doesn't guarantee joy. But at Shangalia, which means literally “to receive with joy and enthusiasm,” I observed an authentic expression of deep gladness when that should have been the last thing expected in this kind of situation. Little kids, singing and dancing and smiling—“God is good, all the time...”

One might think that past and present hardships would strangle out any sign of joy. But throughout history, like at Shangalia, hardships do not necessarily hinder glad expressions. Gladness may reveal itself in surprising locations and through those we least expect due to their suffering. At unexpected places, through unexpected

people, gladness may irrupt. Poet Jack Gilbert writes, “We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world.” The history of the fiery furnace of slavery teaches this.

There’s a cultural folk hero in African American folklore named High John de Conqueror. High John was the embodiment of “a whisper, a will to hope.” He walked with a musical rhythm on a “singing-drum” or “the waves of sound.” “The sign of this man was a laugh, and his singing-symbol was a drum-beat.” He was the slaves’ “hope-bringer.” Where the work was the hardest and most cruel, one might hear the signs of High John even louder.

There was a plantation where the work was extremely hard and the Old Massa, the master, very mean. High John told everybody “what we need is a song.” He, along with other slaves, went on a trip to search for a song without the master seeing them leave. They traveled to hell but the song was not there. They traveled to heaven and “walked up Amen Avenue and down Hallelujah Street, and found with delight that Amen Avenue was tuned to sing bass and alto. The west end was deep bass, and the east end alto. Hallelujah Street was tuned for tenor and soprano. Then the Old Maker, God, called them to his “great workbench, and made them a tune and put it in their mouths. It had no words. It was a tune that you could bend and shape...” In other words, God gave them a song. And when they returned to the plantation, the master was in a horrible mood, but High John reminded the enslaved that they had something “finer than [the] plantation” within themselves and he said “Us got all that, and [the master] don’t know nothing at all about it. After hearing this, Aunt Diskie, a slave, “laughed and hugged herself with secret laughter” and said ‘Us got all the advantage, and Old Massa think he got us tied!’ They broke out in singing and went to work and “the day didn’t seem hot like it had before...[and]the work flew.” The gift of laughter and song brought hope while High John retired “with his secret smile into the soil of the South.”

Laughter, singing, and a smile, gladness, even in the midst of slavery, may be surprising to some because of the harsh, brutal circumstances of an exile. Yet, gladness reveals the spring of life even in death. In tough times, glad singing could be heard on streets in Haiti after their devastating earthquake. Singing could be heard on the streets of Soweto as the people fought for freedom during apartheid. Singing could be heard in the streets of El Salvador as people suffered under the cruel hand of militarism. To be glad does not mean that everything is bright and beautiful. To be glad in moments of great suffering does not mean someone is disconnected from reality or attempting to escape it, but connected to something so real that they can’t help but laugh, sing, and smile.

To be glad is not naïve. The story of High John reveals it can be a form of secret resistance to the status quo, especially any form of oppression. Gladness, laughter, and song, can be an expression of resistance to cruelty, surprising and confusing those propagating the pain. Even in our day, the treacherous powers of death and depression want you to fail and fall exhausted even during this holiday season. But just because the world has gone mad, doesn’t mean that you have to. Rather, you can await the in-breaking of the good news of the gospel that will extend the grace of gladness to you. And that gladness is a way to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick. An unexpected, devastating blow to the principalities and powers with which we wrestle. To be glad, instead of mad, can be an indictment of a brutal system or life. “Stubborn gladness” says ‘no’ to hell and its minions in whatever form. Celebration can be an eudemonic cry that is an expression of one’s refusal to be stopped until we reach freedom’s shore. A smile or laughter in the face of horror can resist fatalism even as it denies destruction while gesturing toward hope in the future.

It points to the future because, as Isaiah reveals, gladness, joy, and singing are spoken of in the future tense revealing how these expressions will resist and overcome the past exile Israel has endured. The past is not eternal. The present is not perfect. But a song may signify that what you see is not all there is anyway and what you experience will not occur *ad infinitum*. The smile, the laugh, the song, anticipate the future and show the belief that something better is coming and has already arrived.

According to Isaiah, “the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” The vision of the future is full of gladness. Isaiah reminds us that gladness is not just a form of resistance. Gladness is an expression of redemption and transformation. A transformation that occurs when the glory of God touches the earth, including the human body. The wilderness and the dry land would not be glad, if the glory of the Lord had not touched it. The desert wouldn’t rejoice. Weak hands would not be strengthened. Feeble knees would not be made firm. The eyes of the blind would not be opened. The ears of the deaf would not be unstopped. The lame wouldn’t leap like deer. The tongue of the speechless would not sing for joy. Waters would not break forth in the wilderness nor streams in the desert. The burning sand would not become a pool nor the thirsty ground springs of water, if it had not been for the Lord, if the glory of God never touched the physical world.

But the glory of God does touch the world, causing trees in the field to clap their hands and the birds in the sky to chirp sublime cheers while the “wilding bee hums merrily by”(William Cullen Bryant). Glory is earthy. A blossoming wilderness (35:1-2, 6b-7), restored physical health (35:3-6a), and the redeemed walking back home (35:8-10). It’s a vision of the transformation of the land and the body, showing that salvation is not mere salvation of individual souls but transformation of the entire creation and humanity. The glory of God touches the earth and makes us glad, perhaps giving to us what is called “the glad surprise”(Howard Thurman).

And glad surprises can be very modest and mundane. As Nelson Mandela said, “We are moved by a sense of joy and exhilaration when the grass turns green and the flowers bloom.” Or, “the simple joy that comes when one discovers that the balance in the bank is larger than the personal record indicated—and there is no error in accounting; the realization that one does not have his door-key—the hour is late and everyone is asleep—but someone very thoughtfully left the latch off, ‘just in case’; the dreaded meeting in a conference to work out some problems of misunderstanding, and things are adjusted without the emotional lacerations anticipated; the report from the doctor’s examination that all is well, when one was sure that the physical picture was very serious indeed. All of these surprises are glad!”(Thurman).

Isaiah is clear that the precondition of the joy and gladness voiced by creation is the affirmation that God is here. This may be the real surprise after all.

When heaven kisses the earth and we hear in the Jerusalem Gleaner the public announcement, “Here is your God,” the real surprise, or maybe the shock, to shock you out of sorrow and sighing, to shock you out of spiritual coma into eternal life, may be who God is when God is introduced. “Here is your God.” Handel’s *Messiah* takes the words of Isaiah and proclaims, “He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: he gave his back to the smiters, and his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: he hid not his face from shame and spitting. Surely, he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him. And with his stripes we are healed.” Here is your God!

That God would want to come our way is a surprise and then to discover what God looks like is an even greater surprise. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth”(John 1:14). A surprise to discover the glory of God incarnate in Jesus Christ and that he’s the reason for and source of our gladness. To see glory enfleshed and to realize that gladness comes from the despised and rejected, the outcast and the excluded, the scarred savior. That our source of redemption comes from the margins, the borderlands of the world. No wonder the kids at Shangalia or the enslaved in history can teach us lessons about gladness; Jesus was one of them, born and living in “the ruthless furnace of this world.” The one whom the builders rejected is the cornerstone of our lives. The rejected one is the redeemer—this may be the real surprise after all.

That no matter who we are or from where we come, God comes to bring joy, not only to us, but to the world, to surprise us with salvation. God’s advent is such a glorious surprise that the angels get so excited and say, “I bring you good tidings of great joy”(Luke 2). Joy because the Lord is come. God gives Godself to us, his real presence, broken and poured out, to make us glad and sing each Sunday for joy. We sing because “[We] know

that [our] Redeemer liveth” and we’re freed ultimately from sorrow and sighing. Don’t you want to be free? Don’t you want to be glad? Don’t you want to sing?

This is what God desires—for you to experience gladness in your gut as an experience of grace, so that come what may, you can sing redemption songs and what you sing may even surprise you—“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by his blood.” Everyone doesn’t like surprises. But this surprise, the real surprise, will save. This is our glad surprise. “Here is your God.” It’s time for the Eucharist, the thanksgiving, so laugh, sing, smile.