

## **Homily – The Joy of 2020**

**Rob Keim**

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I wonder what future movies and films will show about the year 2020. In the same way that we continue to make new movies about World War Two, I wonder if film makers in the year 2040 will be fascinated by this time of the coronavirus. In twenty years we will have a lot of answers to the questions that plague us today. We will have seen the end of the shelter at home and the associated economic impact. We will know the successes of the vaccine and other treatments to help keep us safe. And, while I hope we never forget those who have died, I expect that we will forget some of the anxiety and some of the bickering about individual liberties. I expect that future film makers will show the ways that we all came together to defeat the coronavirus and do what needed to be done for the common good. I expect these future movies to show the joy that happened in the midst of difficult times. And, without whitewashing our current pain, this Christmas I want to focus on joy, for joy is our gift from God.

In our Old Testament reading we heard “You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.” Well I don’t know about that last part about dividing plunder.

And, in our Psalm, chanted by our Choral Scholars, we heard “Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea thunder and all that is in it; let the field be joyful and all that is therein. Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy before the Lord when he comes, when he comes to judge the earth.”

And, in our Gospel reading that Susan just read to us we heard “Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Jesus came into the world as a baby boy to bring us joy. God has hardwired joy into us as our normal way of being, but there are many things that get in the way of this, aren’t there. As we come to the close of a very difficult year, let us use the birth of Jesus to double down on joy.

Maybe you are like me, but throughout my life, I have fond memories of a variety of Christmas joys. As a child my joy focused on Christmas morning and the presents under the tree. As a young parent, my joy was in seeing the joy of my daughter and her cousins. Their excitement about Christmas morning was infectious. As I got a bit older my Christmas joy shifted to a focus on being with extended family and our traditions. Year after year, it was good to be together with loved ones. And, in middle

age, my joy shifted to being together with others in church on Christmas Eve. Each year it felt like homecoming as we were embraced by the beautiful Christmas music and decorations. All of these joys are a little difficult this year. However, even in 2020 God's gift to us continues to be joy.

Now, before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that even before 2020, for some Christmas time can be hard. Sometimes we have experienced the death of a loved one, and Christmas makes that loss extra hard. And sometimes the frenetic activities associated with Christmas are just exhausting. Or, maybe we feel obligated to buy gift after gift, and our credit card balance becomes painful. For some, Christmas can be a time for the blues.

When things are going well it is easy to be joyful. But, there is another side of life. Life can be stressful. It can be unsatisfactory and unreliable. Circumstances beyond our control, like the Coronavirus can turn our world upside and leave it there for a long time. And, while some of us have easier lives than others, none of us can avoid old age, sickness, and death. There is and will be suffering in life, but we must continue on anyway. We all have a choice in how we deal with our suffering and move through it to joy. We can try to avoid it and live in denial. We can resent it and grow bitter. We can simply endure it and resign ourselves to our bad luck. Or, we can discover that there's another way, one that opens us up to wisdom and to life itself. By being open to the suffering that comes into our lives, rather than resisting it, we can learn to let the pain of life's inevitable challenges move through us rather than get stuck. In this way we create the conditions that allow us to be open to more joy. Mindfulness gets to the root of suffering and frees us from its power. As we stop trying to protect ourselves from our painful experiences and mindfully open to them, all those positive qualities within us—understanding, compassion, kindness—can also come to life.

Two of the most inspiring people, I am aware of, who remain open in this way are the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I recently read a book about them called "The Book of Joy." This book is about a series of meetings between these two holy men in which they talk about how we can find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering. Both the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop have seen enormous suffering in their lives, yet somehow they radiate an infectious joy. How is that possible? I believe it is because both know deeply that suffering is part of life and, because of their dedication to spiritual practices, they are not afraid to be with the pain.

Here are a few things I learned from these two men that I hope can increase the resiliency of joy in my own life and in yours. First, it can be important to keep perspective. When you're going through a hard time, the suffering might feel relentless. But often there are moments when the sun peaks through the clouds.

Keep in mind that everything is passing, including negative mind states. Using mindfulness, notice any moments of well-being that arise, even in the hard times. Maybe it is a smile when you see children playing. Perhaps it is the pleasure of tasting a favorite food. In these times instead of sharing a warm hug with a friend, it might be a smile over a video call, or kind words on the phone. Or, maybe you get satisfaction from reading a good book. Don't miss these moments. Whenever positive feelings arise in your heart, body and mind, pause to notice and take them in.

Here is another learning from the Dalai Lama and Archbishop. "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional." This is not to minimize the plight of anyone in severe and relentless pain, but as a general guide this learning has value. We automatically contract from pain—it's a built-in response, warning us of something to avoid if we want to survive. But in the midst of pain we can't avoid, learning to respond with mindfulness can lessen our suffering. To diminish the suffering of pain, we need to make a crucial distinction between the pain of the pain and the pain we create by our thoughts about the pain. Fear, anger, guilt, loneliness, and hopelessness are all mental and emotional responses that can intensify pain. Especially with chronic pain, it's important to distinguish between the physical malady and the sense of helplessness that understandably can accompany it.

And here is a third learning that I got in particular from the Archbishop Desmond Tutu. We must always be aware of God's presence. We are not alone. With every breath that we take, God is embracing us. God is in us and around us. We are immersed in God, but we often forget God, ignore God, or even push God away. I have said it before, but there is nothing we can do to increase God's love for us, and there is nothing we can do to decrease God's love for us. God loves us eternally. And we can respond to God's love with gratitude, gratitude for the blessings we know about and also for the ones we don't know about. When we are grateful people we flow right into joy. For you see, joy is a by-product of gratitude. We are grateful for what we already have. And, we are especially grateful for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The birth of Jesus changed the universe forever. From before the beginning of time, the first emanation from God was the Christ - this perfect union of spirit and matter. And, with the creation of the universe, and its expanse and evolution, the Christ is across all of time and space. Two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it, Jesus was born into this world as a baby boy - a perfect union of human and divine.

That is a big thing, for the birth of Jesus was not a plan-B to fix things that had gone wrong. The good news is that the coming of Jesus was planned from the beginning. And, in ways I do not understand, if there is life on other worlds, then that life was

changed by the birth of Jesus. And ten thousand years from now, the world is different because of Jesus. And, whether you are a follower of Jesus or have never heard his name, your life and death were changed forever by the birth of the baby Jesus in a backwater part of the Roman Empire called Palestine. I may not completely understand how this all works, but my heart sees Jesus, embraces his birth, and celebrates what his birth has done for us.

Twenty year from now in the year 2040, filmmakers will get it right when they show 2020 as a year of joy. I expect that future film makers will show the ways that we all came together to defeat the coronavirus and do what needed to be done for the common good. I expect these future movies to show the joy that happens in the midst of difficult times. And, as I conclude today I want to acknowledge that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures. Joy remains as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.