

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2008  
Lessons: Psalm 126, Philippians 4:4-9, and Luke 15:8-10

## EXPECTING TO SMILE

The feeling of joy comes when the goal has been achieved, the hope realized, the effort rewarded, or the promise kept. At that point of fulfillment, there is a reduction of brain activity, called a decrease in neural density, and we feel a satisfaction that spreads across our faces and, if it's strong enough, flows through our limbs. *Yes, I did it! It worked! It finally happened. It's a dream come true.* Depending upon the situation, we may shout our joy, cheer, jump up and down, hug the people who have been working with us toward this moment of success (or just happen to be standing there). We may even cry but from joy's relief, not sorrow, or we may simply express our contentment with its most basic and universal sign, a smile.

*When the LORD brought Zion's captives home,  
at first, it felt like dream.  
Then our mouths filled with laughter,  
and our tongues with shouts of joy.*

That opening of Psalm 126 translates either as the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion or brought Zion's captives home, but either way, the time of exile has ended and those taken from their homes and families have returned. The day long lived-for, wanted more than anything, has arrived. It's like the day the troop ships entered New York harbor or Los Angeles at the end of World War II. It's the arrival at Ellis Island. It's the day I drove a husband and wife, refugees from Vietnam, to Allentown Airport, and off the plane stepped her sister, brother-in-law, and two little girls. They had made it to safety, and my drive back with the six of them in my car was like sitting in the middle of an excited bell choir. I didn't understand a word spoken, but the language is so musical that the bells rang joyously for the whole thirty-mile drive. And so, the psalm goes on to pray, *God, bring them all home.* And that is the rightful prayer of Christ's church, and I don't mean in any simplistic, mechanical "get 'em saved" way, but in the fullest and deepest sense of redemption and in salvation's countless ways of restoring life and love in this world, "God, bring them all home."

Obviously, we cannot live in a constant state of joy. We cannot walk around all day with the natural, un-self-conscious smile of relief and satisfaction. Life brings us new tasks with fresh interest to fill our minds again with the increased "neural density" of giving our

attention to new matters, concerns, or projects. As the boss says after the celebration of a team job success, “Well, it’s back to work now.” The permanent smile belongs, even in our imaginations, to the phony, the hypocrite, the con artist, or just the grinning fool.

And sometimes joy seems far away because the struggle of life has lost its sense of purpose and direction. In such times, we’re not walking *toward* anything but just slogging along. There is no goal but just endurance as a thing in itself. Then the only relief is escape from consciousness. That’s when people drink too much, lie in bed too late, play video games too many hours, or party “like there’s no tomorrow” because they have in mind no tomorrow any better than today.

That sense of hopelessness is toward the extreme, but the fact of the matter is that all of us experience elements of that extreme. People in clinical depression are only “more so” than the rest who struggle with the blues, the doldrums, or the blahs day after day. We know life has its gains and its losses, but some of those losses are grievous, and we carry them with us, and they change us with the resident sadness they embed in our lives even when we are otherwise happy.

As there is a *resident sadness* behind many smiles, there is also a *resident joy* embedded in people who have put their trust in God. We make a mistake when we paint a Christian smile on that resident joy, and others grow suspicious of us because people who smile at inappropriate times seem not quite sane or, at least, not honest and real. “Count it all joy!” I know, that admonition comes from the Bible, but it has a deeper meaning than grinning in denial of life’s fears and sorrows. Faith’s resident joy can wear a frown, shed tears of grief or empathy with another’s grief, sigh deeply, or grimace in pain. But this resident joy, held even when we are not feeling at all joyous, keeps us from becoming too absorbed in ourselves, too isolated in our own problems or even our ambitions. It becomes then the latent joy of people with a promise and an undergirding belief in that promise that persists even in times of doubt, because their very doubt is held in terms of the promise. Even if in frustration at life or anger at God, they say the words, they are not really asking, “What does it matter?” but, rather, “*How long* before the promise is kept and the day of joy arrives at last?” We hold this resident joy and it holds us in expectation of the smile promised us. And so an apostle who knows what it is to lose and grieve, to give life away and not receive in return, can say with confidence unjustified by current circumstance, “I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am convinced he is able to keep all that I have committed to him in earnest of that day.”

Yes, I know that’s a strange, quaint phrase – “in earnest of” – and I could have just said “until” (“until that day”), but that would have been passive not active, not expectant and therefore alert. “In earnest of” implies down payment, investment of self, steps taken in hope

for what is expected and commitment to its coming. Faith lives in a state of expectancy even when that becomes little more than longing to be surprised by God with life and new possibility, when we may not see how but keep the expectation anyway.

I'm going to finish with a prayer attributed to the great Western theologian Augustine of Hippo. I think it fits especially well in this Advent season of recession, over-work or no work (stressful either way), spending freezes and frozen dreams, simpler pleasures and overwhelmingly complex problems.

God of life,  
there are days when the burdens we carry  
are heavy on our shoulders and weigh us down,  
when the road seems dreary and endless,  
the skies gray and threatening,  
when our lives have no music in them,  
and our hearts are lonely,  
and our souls have lost their courage.  
Flood the path with light,  
turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise;  
tune our hearts to brave music;  
give us the sense of comradeship  
with heroes and saints of every age;  
and so quicken our spirits  
that we may be able to encourage  
the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life,  
to your honor and glory.

Amen.