

St. Paul's, Concord
Christmas Day 2018
Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14
Rev. Kate Atkinson

A few years ago I received a Christmas card – actually I think I'd have to call it a holiday card – that I've never forgotten. In big, proud letters on the front, it said, "The purpose of life is to be happy!" Really? That's the sole reason why God made us and put us here on earth? To be happy? Personally, I've always viewed happiness more as a side benefit...

Some much more memorable words can be found in the opening chapter of John's gospel:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

"...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 1:1-5, 14)

Strange as it may seem, happiness was the reason why God the Father sent his only Son into the world. But I don't mean Jesus came to make us happy, I mean he came to show us that happiness is *not* the be all and end all. Jesus came to teach us what the *true* purpose of life is, to help us see that, although much of what we discover in our journey of faith *will* make us happy, the *real* purpose of our existence is *joy*. And yes, there *is* a difference!

What kind of a world was Jesus born into? One where people were striving for wealth, power, status, beauty, virility, material success of all kinds. Even people of strong religious beliefs were buying into the pursuit of *more, more, MORE* – some of them consumed by the desire for prestige, others wanting to appear so faultless in their devotion that they lost sight of its true purpose. And in both the religious world and the secular world, the quest for happiness had its price. For every advancement in status, for every acquisition, for every self-serving act, there was a corresponding loss.

It's the same today. If people are only concerned with their own happiness, there will always be victims. The poor will become poorer; the weak will grow weaker; the people on the fringe will be pushed further and further away until they become invisible.

In the beginning, when the three persons of the Trinity were working together to create the universe and everything it contains, God broke through the utter darkness, and flooded the formless, desolate earth with dazzling light. Light was one of God's greatest gifts to humankind – enabling us to see the full extent of nature's beauty, to accomplish our work, to learn and compose and build and create and nurture. But God also gave us light to make it possible for us to see what's wrong in the world – to be able to identify those situations and places and people in need of our attention. God's creation, once a place of perfection, deteriorated over the centuries, as a result of people's misguided priorities. With every new day, God continued to bless humankind with light to see by, but we became blind to everything except our own desires.

The problem with making happiness the sole purpose of our life is that it can bring out the worst in us. That's what was happening in the years before Jesus' birth, when God saw the downward spiral and sent prophets to give hope to the world. Isaiah, perhaps the greatest of those prophets, passed on this message: "Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people... all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." (Isaiah 52:9a, 10b)

God promised to give us another chance by sending a Savior to be the Light of the World. Through him we'd have the opportunity to become the people God always intended us to be. Because of him our eyes would be opened and we'd conquer the darkness of sin. From him we would receive the key to eternal life. And that promise was fulfilled one unforgettable night, around 2,000 years ago, when a carpenter took his fiancée to his home town, Bethlehem, to be registered under Caesar's tax laws.

The Light came into the world in the most unlikely of circumstances, in a makeshift bed on the floor of a stable. Don't be deceived by the pretty pictures on your Christmas cards — at the time and place of Jesus' birth, stables were rough and dingy places, often dug out of a hillside with no windows or any other source of light. So the Light of the world came, literally, into the darkness. And it is still the darkest places of the world — and the darkest places of our hearts — that need him most.

"Joy to the World! The Lord is come!" That wonderful carol helps us realize the difference between striving for happiness and being open to joy. Happiness so often depends on acquisitions and achievements, while joy comes from living in the knowledge of God's presence and love. Happiness can be unpredictable and fleeting, while joy is constant and enduring. Happiness can be shattered in a moment of hurt, loss or despair, while joy sustains us throughout life's greatest challenges.

Let me give you an example. This year, like every year, our parish has experienced pain and loss. Time after time our hearts have been broken by the passing of a beloved friend or the news of one more fearful diagnosis. One of those diagnoses came to Alan Topliff who, along with his wife Denice, is a cherished member of this parish. Stage four liver cancer is a death sentence, as Alan is well aware, and yet, at our service of healing prayer last month, when Alan shared his story, it was clear that his illness had not robbed him of the abundant life he continues to enjoy every day.

"At this point I have no idea how long I have," Alan said to us. "It is well understood that, short of a miracle, my cancer is terminal. So I'm taking it one day at a time and savoring the little things that, when healthy, we take for granted..."

"My hope with sharing my journey is that it will help others understand and appreciate how deeply God loves every one of us, and his willingness to help us get through the dark hours that inevitably come."

I can tell you that, as we listened to Alan's words that day, not one of us was feeling *happy*, about the situation he's facing, but we all had a deep and genuine sense of joy. It came from Alan's awareness and assurance of God's overwhelming love for each of us. And it came from

our clear understanding that the abundant life God offers us has absolutely nothing to do with possessions and *everything* to do with loving and caring for the people with whom we share our life, the way God loves and cares for us.

Some of the most joyous events our parish has experienced over this past year, have been the arrival of several babies. 2000 years ago, like millions of mothers before and after her, Mary felt the incomparable joy of gazing at her newborn son while all the pain of childbirth melted away. She knew that *happiness* wasn't guaranteed in the years to come, as Jesus grew up and lived into his ministry and his identity. But Mary also knew that she was doing what God had called her to do, and that God would never desert her. The joy that came from that certainty was a joy that sustained her even when grief pierced her soul like a sword.

Jesus came into the world as a light in the darkness, to show us the difference between worldly happiness and Godly joy. At this holy time of the year, we gather to remember that gift he gave us all those years ago, and to celebrate the ways Jesus continues to inspire and sustain us as we do our best to shine as his light in the world.

May you be blessed by a re-discovery of joy this Christmas, and throughout the new year.