

Garland or Ashes?

Rev. John Allen

Maybe it's my imagination.

But it feels like the Christmas decorations are really up a notch this year around town.

I haven't taken a scientific survey, but it seems like the streets are a bit brighter with more colorful and flashing lights.

I have seen houses with laser shows projected on the whole facade.

Instances of oversize inflatables, are up.

And the current defending champion, as far as our family is concerned, are the anamitroic dancing penguins on Buckingham Rd. set to music which you tune into via an FM radio.

We have a new tradition in our house of going for what our daughter Cora calls "a dark walk" in the early evening, after the sun is down, to take in all these displays.

—

Here is what the prophet Isaiah said to his people, who were suffering under the heart-wrenching sorrow of exile.

Provide for those who mourn in Zion a garland instead of ashes.

Give them the oil of gladness instead of mourning.

And the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

A garland instead of ashes.

—

Maybe it's my imagination.

But it feels like in the past few weeks a real despair has set in with a lot of us.

I haven't taken a scientific survey, but it seems that moods are down, that what is most wearisome about this time is becoming almost unbearable.

Notwithstanding some promising news about a vaccine, a second wave, and the specter of more shutdowns, are putting us over the edge.

I have heard from so many of you over the past few weeks who are crying out from the depths of your souls, “how long?”

And I find my own spirit joining in that longing question.

—

Are these different people? Do those giant inflatable reindeer mark a house where everything is ok? While the rest of us are struggling?

I don’t think so.

I have to assume that behind most of the glittering lights and wreaths and bows, are people who are also having a hard time right now, each in their own way. People who are vulnerable to severe illness. People who have lost loved ones to this pandemic. Parents who don’t know how they are going to make it through the next week of school. People who have lost work. Or who are unsure how they will keep a roof over their head in the coming months.

No if the excesses of decoration this year show us anything, it is that these kind of displays of joyous extravagance are not just the things we do to express the abundant joy we are feeling. Somethings they are things we do in an attempt to banish gloom and despair. Sometimes they are not expressions of joy we already feel, but instance in the possibility of joy.

In an advent devotional from his book *All I Really Want*, Quinn Caldwell wrote about the year that his father died just a few days before Christmas.

“I remember realizing, on that Christmas when my dad was dying, that Christmas trees are not always an expression of serene joy. They are not the gilding on the lily of a perfect life.

At least sometimes, they are the only beautiful thing in the middle of a wasteland. That year, every little glass ball I put on that tree felt like an act of defiance. As I hung each ornament, it was like shouting, ‘Take that, misery’ ‘Eat it, addiction’ ‘Bite me, cancer’ ‘Die, death.’”

—

Here is what the prophet Isaiah said to his people, who were suffering under the heart-wrenching sorrow of exile.

Provide for those who mourn in Zion a garland instead of ashes.

Give them the oil of gladness instead of mourning.

And the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

A garland instead of ashes.

—

As many of us are living through a moment of unique challenge to our psyche's and spirits, there are also many in our world for whom the this kind of ever-present pain is nothing new.

In the United States, Black culture can teach us something profound about the power of joy in the face of suffering.

In 2015 author Kleaver Cruz started the Black Joy Project. A movement intended to help create space for expressions of joy for Black people, and a platform to show the world the joy of Blackness.

Cruz says that “black joy is not about dismissing the reality of our collective pain; rather, it is about holding the pain and injustices we experience in tension with the joy we experience. It’s about using that joy as a means to imagine and create different world.”

For people, like Cruz, who have been marginalized a victimized, simply expressing joy can be an act of extraordinary resistance and bold imagination.

Or take the story Tracy Michael Lewis Giggerts recently recounted in a the Washington Post. After a simple joyful moment dancing in the rain with her young daughter, she found herself back in the house, balanced on that fine edge between uncontrollable laughter and weeping.

“Our dancing in the rain wasn’t a denial of all the storms that had moved in on black people that week.” She writes. “It was a dare. A way to say “you can’t steal our joy” to anyone who’d dare deny our humanity.”

—

Provide for those who mourn in Zion a garland instead of ashes.

Give them the oil of gladness instead of mourning.

And the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

A garland instead of ashes.

—

I want to be very clear. When it comes to understanding how how joy can be a way to resist despair, putting up some extra lights at Christmas does not even scratch the surface of the depth of wisdom of marginalized people and communities.

But I do think they flow from the same human truth.

Acting joyful amidst suffering is never merely self-delusion or denial.

It is not a distraction. It is a bold and audacious act of hope.

And for us, it is an act of faith. For even though in this advent we are waiting, we know what is coming. We know a God whose grace alone is sufficient for our every need. Whose love alone is cause for joy to break forth in our hearts.

So I want to encourage you to do something this week with a little joy in your heart. Even if you don't really feel like it.

Put on a Christmas song and dance around your kitchen. Or give your tackiest decoration the place of honor. Watch something that you know will make you laugh.

Not as a way of pretending that everything is ok. But as a way of insisting that even when things are not ok, joy has a place in this world. And in our lives.

And that nothing can take our joy away.