



*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dearest family,

On the second Sunday in Advent, I drew your attention to the number of themes of gospel truth and spiritual life that were embedded in the incarnation narrative, the overture of the New Testament. On the third Sunday of Advent, I pointed out the obvious theme of joy, that regardless of the national or personal context that was dark and destitute, despairing or discouraging, joy kept breaking in, breaking through and breaking out. As most of you know, every year for nearly 30 years, I have written an advent poem to capture my meditation of that year, and not surprisingly, what I spoke on my last two messages was the simple theme of a simple poem that I present to you as a Christmas meditation and a summary of the pre-Christmas message.

**Surprising Joy by Stuart McAlpine**

1.

Above the sunken hope the incense rose.  
 The silence of four hundred years screamed pain.  
 The worship could not hide the welts and woes  
 Of spirits crushed by godless Roman reign.  
 There was no reason for prayers to be bold,  
 This was no season for faith to be firm.  
 The expectation was just 'the-same-old',  
 The future devoured by the canker-worm.  
 But still the liturgy must be intoned,  
 Without a sense of being seen or heard.  
 Why would this priest believe God was enthroned?  
 There were no wonders and there was no Word.  
 "Your asking has been answered," spoke a voice.  
 "He'll be a joy and many will rejoice."

3.

All was not calm, or gentle, mild and bright.  
 At first, there were no angels' songs to hark,  
 The peace was pricked with sharpened shards of fright.  
 Virginitly seemed threatened in the dark.  
 And Bethlehem not quite so still did lie  
 As census-citizenry fought for beds;  
 And not so silent did the stars go by,  
 As visions tore the dreamless sleep to shreds.  
 Too young, too old, too sinful, just too bad;  
 The litany of threat, chillingly clear,  
 Too late, too shameful, too doubting, too sad;  
 Divorce, disgrace, disturbed, terrified, fear.  
 "Be not afraid for I am heaven's envoy,  
 I bring to you the good news of great joy."

2.

Aaron's descendant, perfect pedigree,  
 In God's sight upright, keeping all the law,  
 Observing regulations blamelessly,  
 But if her heart was righteous, why so raw?  
 Because it had outpoured infertile tears,  
 Bearing her barrenness with public shame;  
 Because she was now well along in years,  
 And never would an infant get to name.  
 The brokenness of longings crushed and killed,  
 The loneliness of childless days and nights,  
 The sadness of a crib that was unfilled,  
 All sighed the loss of motherhood's delights.  
 "Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear a boy."  
 "The babe within my womb did leap for joy."

4.

My circumstances do disqualify  
 This one, in my mind, from your graciousness,  
 And convince and condemn me to deny  
 Deliverance from my unworthiness;  
 That I could be a player in your acts  
 Of incarnation, of your kingdom come.  
 I bow my knee and submit all the facts  
 Of my life to your generous wisdom,  
 And as at Jesus', my Christ's, promised birth,  
 Let not resigned despair or dull dismay  
 Obscure the revelation of His worth,  
 Obstruct the ending of my joy's delay.  
 "Make me hear joy," as David did entreat;  
 You said if I asked "joy will be complete."

I have labored the point that joy is a community business, a community fruit. Are there any clues in the life of the early church community about how to consciously cultivate this DNA of community joy, this fruit of the Spirit, this corporate experience of living on the vine? Again, clearly it is a gift and fruit of the magnificent work of the Holy Spirit; it flows from our abiding life in Christ, the Vine. Paul was arguably the most effective apostolic church planter and community builder. He wrote the book on koinonia, on fellowship. What can we glean from him as foundational to any Christian community, whether a local church or an itinerant missions team? Is it complicated? No, it is almost effortlessly accessible as we co-operate with the Spirit's work and Jesus' desires. My key scripture was 2 Corinthians 1:24 where hear Paul says "*We are helpers of your joy.*" There's that idea of being, not the source, but the support of another's joy. Paul saw the cultivation of this fruit of joy in others in the community as a goal of his work and an evidence of his ministry. Here is a basic rationale for ministry. Can you make the connection between the fruit of the Spirit that is joy in your life, and the life and health of this community? Do you, can you, see yourself as a helper of another's joy in this community that is COSC? Could you stand and say to everyone else at COSC, like Paul, "I am a helper of your joy." Will you make this an intentional part of your job description this year? Is this descriptive of how you choose to see yourself and how you relate to each other? Is it a key motive in how you lead or serve? So how can you help another's joy? This illustrates again that joy is a by-product, in this case of how you relate to another branch that is rooted in the vine.

Here is a very brief summary of my points about how the early church were encouraged to become helpers of another's joy, in a way that increased the joy of the community. You will have to download message for the added commentary. This is not the perfect 10 – but enough to get you thinking and hopefully, feeling.

#### Summary:

1. *Truly loving one another from the heart will result in the sharing of your joy with another which makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (Jn. 15:9-12)
2. *Taking joy in another with the resultant affirmation and encouragement that flows from that makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (1 Thess. 2:19-20; 1 Thess. 3:9; 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 4:1)
3. *Your commitment to care for another and refresh them by your love and kindness and healing ministry makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (Philemon v7; 2 Cor. 2:3; 2 Cor. 7:13)
4. *Coming to another, or to any task with godly joy, makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (Rom. 15:2; Acts 21:17)
5. *Your faithful testimony, your dutiful and at times against the odds unspectacular obedience, your walking in the truth makes you a helper of their joy and increases joy in the community.* (3 Jn.v4)
6. *Your commitment to godly loyalty and reliability and productivity and order and stability makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (Col. 2:5)
7. *Adhering to a biblical theology of suffering, and identifying with the suffering of others, makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (Phil. 2:17-18; Hebr. 12:2)
8. *Refusing to marginalize the place of the Word and the place of prayer, makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (Phil. 1:4; 1 Thess. 1:6)
9. *When you respect and honor each other in the scriptural structures and procedures that determine the exercise and flow of godly authority, and submit to one another in these relationships, then this makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (Hebr. 13:17)
10. *When you joyfully submit in relationships, when you joyfully do all necessary to walk in unity with the saints then this makes you a helper of others' joy and increases joy in the community.* (Phil. 2:2)

Rejoice dear-hearts, and again I say, rejoice. Could we be a joyful bunch this year on the vine that is Christ, whose sap is the joy of the Spirit. Could we make it our personal and therefore communal resolution that as for me and my house, I/we will be a helper of another's joy.

Joyfully yours,  
Stuart