

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Year A

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Text: Isaiah 9:1-4

Title: “Fresh Start: Overcoming SAD—Spiritual Affective Disorder. Lighten Up!

The late 1960’s and early 1970’s were not easy days in our country. Vietnam, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, protests across the country, and Watergate all had the power to dampen spirits. As an 11 or 12 year old listening to all of this and feeling the affects of people’s attitudes about what was happening, I remember my parents taking our family to see Bob Hope. Hope had the right last name because his humor brought laughter to those of us who were struggling with what was happening in the world. I still remember Mr. Hope standing on stage at what was then the Civic Center in Saginaw, spewing out his stories and jokes.

*A guy went to join the mafia, he said. As an initiation rite they told him,
“Go out and blow up a car.” He came back with burnt lips.*

*"It's so cold in Washington, D.C., that politicians have their hands in
their own pockets."*

*"I grew up with six brothers. That's how I learned to dance..... waiting for
the bathroom."*

Bob Hope had a gift of making people laugh when sometimes life didn’t seem very funny.

Most of you knew John Senn, a member of this congregation. John shared Bob Hope’s gift of humor. Often when I’d go visit John he’d have a string of humorous jokes or stories to tell:

*What goes “Vroom-screech, vroom-screech”?
A blonde driving through a flashing red light.*

*What does a blonde name her pet zebra?
Spot*

*Why are all dumb blond jokes one liners?
So men can understand them.*

*What's the difference between government bonds and men?
Government bonds mature.*

*What's the best way to force a man to do sit-ups?
Put the TV remote control between his feet.*

*What did God say after he created man?
"I can do better than this."*

All of these came from a thick packet of humorous cartoons, jokes and stories that John gave me. As I said sometimes I'd go and it seemed as if he had been practicing a series of jokes or humorous stories and couldn't wait to catch me off-guard with his humorous script. John had a way of bringing laughter to people too in spite of enduring the many years of suffering from M.S. that eventually took his life.

Humor and joy has a way of helping us cope with the stresses and strains of life.

With this understanding let's turn to Isaiah who lived in a time of great trouble and threat. Since the death of Solomon 200 years or so earlier, Israel and Judah lost much of the wealth and power held by Solomon as the sons of Solomon could not agree on a single ruler and so the once united kingdom had been divided: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In the ensuing years they were tormented by powerful neighbors and Israel was no more by the time Isaiah lived and proclaimed his prophetic word. The northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Their leaders, the wealthy and the educated were carted off and replaced with Assyrians. The remaining kingdom of Judah in which Isaiah lived and prophesied faced international pressures. A tiny nation, they were sandwiched between the great powers of Assyria and Egypt. The people of Judah feared that they would be next. Listen to the words of Isaiah spoken in the context of deep and justified fears:

9 But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

3 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.

4 For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,

you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Into a dark time--into the fears held by the people--Isaiah offers words of hope, the kind of hope that brings laughter and joy—rejoicing and no gloom. God's plans for the people include the kind of laughter people experience when the crop has been outstanding and the harvesting time is filled with gratitude and joy for the gift of an abundant crop. God, it would seem, would have them laugh in the face of their darkness. God would have the people experience the joy of a great hope.

That great hope, that great light experienced by those who lived in the land darkness, came to be associated with Jesus, the light of the world. And Jesus, contrary to portrayals of him through the centuries, was no “glooming gus”. In fact, Jesus in the Gospel accounts was known to enjoy a good party. His first miracle in John's Gospel was to turn water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

In Mark's Gospel at the very beginning of his ministry we read that he was at a dinner party:

¹⁵ ...as he sat at dinner^[a] in Levi's^[b] house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting^[c] with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the scribes of^[d] the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat^[e] with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹⁷ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners”
(Mark 2:15-17).

Jesus, as it turns out, was very different from other religious teachers and leaders. Jesus did not separate himself from anyone. And yet, he was constantly criticized for not doing so in the Gospel accounts.

In Luke's account he is once again being criticized for his partying behavior with the wrong people. The nagging critics whined about John the Baptist's austere living and preaching, and now they cannot help themselves from launching their venom on Jesus who drinks wine and enjoys dinner parties with the wrong crowds. What exactly DO they want? Jesus responds:

³¹ “To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not weep.’

³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; ³⁴ the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ ³⁵ Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her

children” (Luke 7:31-35).

Elton Trueblood published a book in 1964 titled The Humor of Christ in which he writes that Jesus is poking fun at his critics, finding humor in their unrelenting criticism of anyone who seems different from the critics. In the end, he seems to be saying that if the lives of ordinary people are enriched and glorified, then your criticism is a trivial matter. “I will judge by my consequences if you will judge by yours.”

For some reason, it reminds me of a colleague with whom I served in the Essexville community. Ed had been the pastor of the Baptist church. I was serving at St. Luke’s. He’d been there 12 years when he came over to St. Luke’s one day, came into my office and told me with a smile on his face, “Well, Duane, I have finally managed to make all my people happy.” I said, “What do you mean, Ed?” He said, “I’ve decided to take another church, so I’ll be leaving Essexville in a few months which means I’ve finally managed to make everyone happy in my congregation. I made some of them happy when I came, some of them happy when I stayed and now some of them happy that I’m leaving.” He laughed and I with him.

I am convinced that Jesus exuded deep joy and expressed himself in such a way that people wanted to be near him--with him--like moths attracted to the light on a dark night, and part of that appeal was the joy they experienced in him. In John’s Gospel as he is preparing his disciples for his own death, he tells them:

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

Remember that Jesus lived in a time of Roman occupation and the iron fist of Roman cruelty was part of the reality of living in those times. Crucifixion was not invented for Jesus, after all. The Romans had been practicing this corporal punishment long before Jesus came on the scene as a way to terrify subjugated people and keep control. These were not days of national pride for the Jews. And yet Jesus could laugh and find humor even in those mean-spirited critics, even in the days of subjugation. He was and is light in the darkness of critics and oppressors alike.

Jesus was teaching and preaching his sermon on the mount in Matthew when he says:

7 “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. **2** For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. **3** Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s^[a] eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? **4** Or how can you say to your neighbor,^[b] ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? **5** You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s^[c] eye.

What a ludicrous image he offers. Can you imagine? Let’s try this out.

(Put on my “log-in-the-eye” hat and go out and try to pick out some specks.)

This penchant we sometimes have of making judgments about those around us and yet at the same time being blind to our own shortcomings. Jesus is saying “lighten up! First, pay attention to your own weaknesses, your own impurities, your own faults before you insist on offering your assistance in pointing out someone else’s.”

Trueblood, the author of The Humor of Christ, wrote that his family was all together on Sunday afternoon and they were reading from the 7th chapter of Matthew. They were all serious and solemn as they read and his little boy started to laugh. When asked why, the boy explained how silly it was for someone to see a speck of something in someone else’s eye but had a beam in their own. He understood perfectly that the human eye is not large enough to have a log or beam in it and so the whole idea of it struck him as ludicrous. Hence the laughter.

Maybe that is another reason Jesus told his disciples:

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matthew 19:14).

Children, after all, see things and understand things in a way adults sometimes miss. So often they bring us joy, make us laugh. Sometimes just watching them play or hearing them laugh lightens our spirits too. Maybe one of the things Jesus calls us to pay attention to in children is the joy in them even—and maybe especially—in those times we see and experience more darkness than light.

We have no homework insert for you this morning but in this next week consider finding time to gather with some friends or your family and watch a comedy like Patch Adams to lighten your heart and make you all laugh together. Maybe find a joke book or find some on line and spend 30 minutes reading jokes to each other to lighten the mood. For God is a God of the light and not the dark. That is not to say you should minimize or ignore the pain in your life. That is not the point of this at all. Covering up pain by laughing over it isn’t dealing with it in a way that brings healing. The Lord isn’t just a laughing God but also a healing God, so please don’t think this is about ignoring the serious matters of life by putting on the mask of laughter. But rather, it’s an invitation to allow the joy of God to soothe our souls in spite of the struggles we sometimes experience in this life.

A pastor got up one Sunday morning with a bandage on his chin. He began the sermon, “I’m sorry about the bandage but I was thinking about the sermon and cut my chin.” Someone from the congregation shouted out, “Next time why not think about your chin and cut the sermon?”

An embarrassed woman came out after the service and said to the pastor, “I hope you didn’t take it personally when my husband walked out on your sermon.”

“I did find it rather disconcerting,” the preacher replied.

“It’s really not a reflection on you, sir,” she said. “Ralph has been walking in his sleep ever since he was a child.”