

Today we lit the candle of joy and every year, as the nights get colder and winter sets in and the joy week comes around my daughter Anna reminds me of a video clip she sent me one time that expressed pure joy to her. I think I have shown you this before but like a good story that bears repeating, this one is a gift that keeps on giving.

I don't know this guy's name but my Anna tells me he was on day 86 of his return hike to the South Pole, one of the nastiest environments on the planet. Prior to this epic journey, he had buried caches of supplies along the way and GPS marked them. He was hungry as he arrived at the next cache location and he did recordings along the way. Part of his motivation strategy in preparation for this difficult journey was to deliberately did not list off any of the treat food that he stashed away in the caches, and he had been on a strict superfood diet for the last 86 days. Let's watch what happens when, after days and days of deprivation and struggle he opens the cache.

Show the video

Now, for me part of what makes me want to watch this video over and over is the joy in his voice in a Scandinavian language that I don't understand which makes the joy come through even clearer. But did you catch exactly what put him over the joyful top? It was when he pulled out the bag of cheese doodles. I don't even know what cheese doodles are, but if they are anything like Hawkins Cheezies I get it. If you were hungry and if you have not had any treat food for a long time, it makes a particularly charming kind of sense to lie on your back in the middle of nowhere singing the Halleluia Chorus because you get cheese doodles.

Deprivation, hunger, struggle, suffering- all of that is a part of life we tend to avoid and push away as best we can, but it is in the harsh times, in the struggle time that we realise some of the simplest things can so very sweet.

And I guess that is why we read from the prophets at this time of year, Isaiah today. The prophets speak to a people who have lived without, had struggled, been humiliated after the fall of Jerusalem and the exile. And so today Isaiah paints a picture of just how sweet it will be when after such a long time of suffering they return, and can once again do the thing that we took for granted for so long- worship God in the land of the covenant. Oh won't that be so sweet:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;

like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly

and rejoice with joy and shouting.

The very land will be joyful when after such a long time of struggle, they return. The joy is born of suffering which makes the joy possible.

I do believe there is a connection between suffering and joy. It is not that you have to suffer to actually feel joy, but struggle seems to have the capacity to heighten our awareness of the sweetness of life and the sheer wondrous beauty of little things.

I think that is why when John the Baptist proclaimed his wild and raw message of repentance he went out into the desert to do it. In the city there is too much noise, too much clutter, too many competing claims and voices and pressures. So John went out to the dry harsh, sparse place and people followed him. And in the clarity of the wilderness, everyone could see their lives more clearly. That is where the hard truth could be heard, and hear it they did.

“Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Change is a comin’” And they heard, and in the clarity of the wilderness air, the message got through in a way that it could not have in the comfort of home. So the crowds asked, “what should we do?” And he said, act with kindness. And the tax collectors asked, “what shall we do?” And he said, “act generously.” And the soldiers asked, “What shall we do?” And he said, “Act fairly.” Re-balance your life. There is way too much of some things and not enough of others.

Harsh times and harsh environments create the conditions in which we see more clearly what matters, what makes life good. It is a particular divine genius that created a world in which we discover the goodness of life in the depth of the struggle.

There is a yin and yang to life to which our bible points and which, in time, we all discover. So that we no longer flee from the harder parts of life, but see them as equally important in helping us become the people God calls us to be. And as much as we want things to be smooth and easy and we long for life to be kind to the people we love, we also know that some of the most important things we have learned have come to us in the harshes of places and in the hardest times.

And so on this Sunday when we light the candle of joy...

I wish you happiness but not at the expense of sadness, for sadness keeps us human.

I wish you success, but not at the expense of failure, for failure keeps us humble and makes us tender to the struggles of others.

I wish you strength but not at the expense of weakness for weakness helps us see how much we need each other to make it through.

I wish you faith, but not at the expense of doubt because doubt is the very energy that moves us to be curious, and to discover what is beyond our current understanding.

I wish you confidence but not at the expense of uncertainty, for in the light of uncertainty we are able to see and value the other ways people of seeing the world.

I wish you peace, but not at the expense of conflict, for conflict is a powerful force in the creation of the just world that makes peace possible.

And finally, I wish you joy. Of course, on this day I wish you joy, but not at the expense of suffering. For joy born of ease is thin and fragile, but joy born of suffering is strong and lasting and deep and real.

Amen