

“DANCING FOR THREE HOURS” OR “SINGING AT MIDNIGHT!”

January 24, 2010

Epiphany, Third Sunday (Year C)

Text: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

The Rev. Hugh E. Brown, III, D. Min., Rector

“This day is holy to the Lord your God: do not mourn or weep...Go your way, eat the fat, and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah, Chapter 8)

Mr. Albert Makle of Brandywine, Maryland, in Prince George’s County, died after a long illness.

It was just a few weeks into my tenure at St. Philip’s, Baden and I was planning my first funeral at this historic, African-American Episcopal Church in the suburbs of Washington DC.

As the funeral was to begin and we processed into the church with incense, a Gospel hymn, clapping, and raised arms (funeral or note, this church was always celebrating and using “incarnational theology” of embodied worship at its best!), I was seated beside one of a handful of laity and clergy who had asked to speak on Mr. Makle’s behalf. Mr. Makle not only had given his beautiful voice to the St. Philip’s Church choir but to a number of Gospel choirs in the area and he was known throughout Southern Prince George’s County in the African-American community.

The pastor saw the gifted orators who were going to speak and whispered into my ear, “Rev. Brown, did you put a time limit on these folks?”

I whispered back, “No.” Raised a cradle Episcopalian, I had always understood and experienced brief eulogies at services if there were any reflections offered at all. He smiled,

touched my arm and said, “relax and enjoy, we are going to be here a while.”

Well, about two and half hours into the service, we were just coming to the exchange of peace and beginning of Holy Communion.

During the exchange of peace, I thought I would really “catch it” from long-standing elders of St. Philip’s, who were rather formal, Anglican-style liturgists.

But, one of them came up to me and said, probably speaking for all I could gather from their shared experience, “Rev. Brown, I have never had so much fun at a Funeral in my life—this must be different for you! Welcome to a black Episcopal Church! “Ted” (as they called Albert Makle) must be singing in heaven.”

And another, speaking of one pastor who actually “danced” half of his eulogy, “I could have had his sermon go on and on and he could have danced for three hours!”

And I, myself raised my arms, and said, “Thank you Jesus!” I remembered that marvelous phrase from Genesis in reference to the Joseph cycle, “what I intended for evil, God used for good. Or, perhaps, in my case, what I did not intend, God used in deliberate intention!

Such is the way of genuine joy. It is a choice and intention—not strictly an emotion. It is beyond affects and subjection. It is about action.

We might call it, in the words of the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, “an act of subversive defiance.”

This is what the great leaders, priests and prophets, Ezra and Nehemiah counseled the people upon their return to southern Palestine, their homeland, following a humiliating defeat and destruction of their nation in the early 5th century before Christ.

Oh yes, the people had their land back. O yes, the walls of the second

temple were beginning to be rebuilt; O yes the people could hear the word of God, the law of Moses as a free people (or at least somewhat liberated—might think of their plight as akin to the Palestinian state on the West Bank and in Gaza).

There was actually little reason to celebrate. The Persian King, Artaxerxes, who let the Jewish people go and return, after the conquered their Babylonian masters, always had the people in his sights as their master and occupier.

But no, Nehemiah said to the people, Go, eat of the fat and drink of the wine. Do not be grieved."

What this is all about is joy—the true radical, subversive defiance.

Joy can be an ambiguous term. Many people link it with happiness and the enhancement of their circumstances—health, success, fame, wealth, pleasure, fun or good fortune.

In that sense of the word, joy is derivative, attached to and dependent upon some external source. Joy of that sort can exude a sense of smugness, entitlement, narcissism, and even self-pity in the absence of desired objects.

We all know privileged people who enjoy the most fortunate of personal circumstances, but who are never content, deeply insecure, and always unhappy—and conversely, people who possess little but nevertheless radiate equanimity and gladness.

Which is sadder—the one could be so easily fulfilled by so very little—a new car, a bigger house, or the blast of the rams horn or the shout from the roof top.

No, the above might be described as the American way of happiness (far from the ideal of happiness described by the classical philosophers or early Christian theologians—or a great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas) which can never truly satisfy.

No, genuine joy might be described by C. S. Lewis as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction....I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would manipulate circumstances to our own advantage to obtain what we think expand great efforts in pleasure-seeking, joy is entirely gratuitous. You receive it as a gift. It is a divine gift to receive rather than a self gift to pursue.

When I think of the gift of genuine joy, I think of the awesome image of the people of a church of Haiti last Sunday, days after the earthquake and within some of the bitterest moments of despair.

Some of asked, "Where IS God in the midst of all the suffering?"

Angry and bitter voices might say that God is punishing for sin. This is certainly not the God of Jesus Christ who heals, redeems and brings GOOD News.

Some would say, yes, it is in the hearts and hands of relief.

But, it is, perhaps, above all, in the stories of those who have chosen, even in the midst of great darkness, to receive the gift of joy which no one can ever take away.

It is in the gift of a pastor and people, yes, dancing hours around a still-standing cross within a broken church—laughing, singing, clapping, and giving glory to God.

It is about the Episcopal Bishop of Haiti, his cathedral reduced to rubble, his Diocese virtually destroyed, sharing his deep faith in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in the words, "God is still present; God is present in the light; God is present in the dark. God is always here." It is about this same Bishop, grieving over loss, while offering the deepest serenity of spirit and then the opening of the last vestige of his Diocese, an orphanage, to thousands of

homeless and broken children, women and men.

It is about a group of Haitian men and women, persevering night and day, to pull a little girl from the ruins of a home, while singing and praying, "we sing at midnight and joy will come in the morning."

Yes, how good it is for the people of God to sing at midnight and live in hope!

The greatest glory we can give Almighty God, wrote the English mystic Julian of Norwich, "is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love." No matter how bleak, how unnerving our personal circumstances, or how pessimistic the fortunes of our lives, we can expect his love to blossom even in the dirt of our cottage floors."

In his poem, *The Revival*, the Welsh poet and physician Henry Vaughn, calls us to open our "drowsy eyes," to experience the drops and dews of future bliss we can make or refuse.

"Unfold! Unfold! Take in His light,
Who makes thy cares more short
than night.

The joys which with His day-star
rise.

He deals to all but drowsy eyes:

And, what the men of this world
miss

Some drops and dews of future bliss.

Hark! How His winds have chang'd
their note!

And, with warm whispers call the
out;

The frosts are past, the storms are
gone,

The backward life at last comes on.

The lofty groves in express joys

Reply unto the turtle's voices;

And here in dust and dirt O here

The lilies of his Love appear!