

FCCS December 15, 2018  
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### “Deep Joy”

Twinkle lights are the perfect metaphor for joy. Joy is not a constant. It comes to us in moments—often ordinary moments. Sometimes we miss out on the bursts of joy because we’re too busy chasing down extraordinary moments. Other times we’re so afraid of the dark that we don’t dare let ourselves enjoy the light. A joyful life is not a floodlight of joy. That would eventually become unbearable. I believe a joyful life is made up of joyful moments gracefully strung together by trust, gratitude, inspiration, and faith. Brene’ Brown

After dinner with my parents Friday night, Ellis Jane and her friend Denise sat down with us to watch Frank Kapra’s masterpiece, “It’s a Wonderful Life”. Now, this was an old school viewing, we watched it on the television complete with commercial interruptions.

My dad hit the mute button when the ads came on- which gave Denise, who was seeing the movie for the first time, a chance to ask questions about the plot and its various characters. Having seen the movie several times Ellis Jane did her best to answer and when, about half way through the film, Denise asked why this was considered a Christmas movie Ellie responded, *Oh, just wait, you’ll see and by the end you will understand.*

I am not exactly sure what that meant to her nine-year old brain, but to me, it sort of says it all. Plus, it’s a perfect parallel to this lesser known biblical text from the book of Baruch.

Baruch was written to explain the Babylonian exile and eventual return of the Hebrew peoples to Jerusalem. It was designed to teach two things;

- 1) It is never too late to repent, to return to God.
- 2) When that happens, God rejoices as would a mother at the return of her children whom she had given up for lost.

In It’s Wonderful Life, we learn that Jimmy Stewart’s character George has reached the end of his rope. Things have consistently been so difficult for him that he wonders if his life has made any difference at all. In a fit of desperation, he concludes that it has not and that he’s left with no choice but to end it.

George feels that all the good he’s done will tomorrow be or has already been forgotten, can you put yourself in that place?

Have you ever felt like no matter how hard you try it will never be enough? When bad news just keeps coming do you feel your spirit sinking lower and lower? Paradoxically, we find ourselves in this the third week of Advent and the subject is Joy. Really Joy- after the week the world has had, after the year the world has had?

Name your poison there is plenty to go around; personal trauma, illness, loss, rejection, increased devastation of the environment, flagrant disregard of human rights. Just as George Baily had reason to despair, and Jerusalem to dawn sackcloth and morn for the corruption destroying her people, so you and I could easily want to crawl into bed and never get out. How is this a Christmas story? *Oh, just wait, by the end you will understand.*

In this the final chapters of the Book of Baruch, the people have seen the errors of their ways. They realize that right relationship with God requires a renewed commitment to justice; they can no longer overthrow their neighbor for petty greed and the pursuit of personal gain. They realize that giving glory to God means living compassionately with one another, that creating a just society is the best way to reflect the presence of God within it.

Those who returned to the Temple in as much as it was for Jerusalem at that time the embodiment of God, chose to return to the bigger picture. They offered their lives once more as examples of God's love. And God rejoiced, as a mother would at the return of her long-lost children.

At the pivotal moment when George Baily can no longer bear the pain in his heart, the voice of God chimes in, offering him a chance to see what life would have been like had he never been born. With the feeble angel Clarence at his side, George Baily sees that the compassionate acts of one lowly person in the face of injustice- is in fact nothing small at all. When George returns to the temple of his life, reborn as it were through the pain of regret and disappointment, he is embraced with the love of those for whom his compassion has made all the difference, and we see finally what makes this a Christmas story.

Joy, deep joy is not born of platitudes and skimming the surface of life, it is born out deep diving risk and failure. It is born out of broken hearts, and broken-hearted people reaching out to one another.

Joy is every bit in those small acts of speaking out on behalf of the vulnerable, standing in solidarity with the plight of the refugee, working day by day in all the ways we do for the betterment of this nation and planet. We never know for certain where it all will lead, we just have to commit to living meaningful lives based on consistency rather than perfection. And just like the Israelites, return to God, return to compassion, return to justice over and over again. That's why we keep telling the Christmas story.

Prayer for the Morning By Audette Fulbright Fulson

Did you rise this morning,  
broken and hung over  
with weariness and pain  
and rage tattered from waving too long in a brutal wind?  
Get up, child.  
Pull your bones upright  
gather your skin and muscle into a patch of sun.  
Draw breath deep into your lungs;  
you will need it  
for another day calls to you.  
I know you ache.  
I know you wish the work were done  
and you  
with everyone you have ever loved  
were on a distant shore  
safe, and unafraid.  
But remember this,  
tired as you are:  
you are not alone.  
Here  
and here  
and here also  
there are others weeping  
and rising  
and gathering their courage.  
You belong to them  
and they to you  
and together,  
we will break through  
and bend the arc of justice  
all the way down  
into our lives.

## Alleluia, What A F\*cking Year (a holiday or anytime prayer)

For the love of God,  
what.a.f\*cking.year.

The truth crusading! The justice making!  
The fires, the floods, the impact.  
And the undeniable RISING of... us.

For the pain we turned into power,  
the bullshit we composted into progress,  
for the grace we found in the grit...  
give us an ALLELUIA!  
ALLELUIA!

For being idealistic, bravely broken hearted, and keeping it Real.  
For the times we chose to expand instead of contract;  
and for that one time we knew better but we did it anyway—  
and we managed to forgive ourselves and clean up the mess...  
give us an ALLELUIA!  
ALLELUIA!

Sweet Creator, in your reflection we see that  
we are so very beautiful and so profoundly good.  
We're amazing.  
We're kind of crazy, not always clear, and a bit desperate some days,  
but we keep showing up, hearts on sleeves and hopes in hand.  
give us an ALLELUIA!  
ALLELUIA!

For the nourishment we give,  
and the nourishment we receive  
we give thanks!

Bless our togetherness, our causes, our callings.  
Bless this mess and all its divine perfection.  
For hope, for the deep joy,  
for everything and absolutely all of it...  
give us an ALLELUIA!

