

## **In a Little While**

*Jeremiah 31:1-14; John 16:16-24*

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Are we there yet? How much longer? That's what I really want to know. Both Jeremiah and Jesus tell us over-the-top-joy is coming. Restoration is coming. Wholeness is on the way. Again, God will build, again the people will plant. Again they will dance and celebrate. Again, you will see me. In a little while your joy will be complete and permanent.

So, what I want to know is: When? Like a small child on a long car trip, I find myself asking my Father: Are we there yet? How much longer? When will we be gathered up and brought together, free to eat and drink and dance and sing? You keep saying "in a little while" and "again" but it doesn't seem as if we're getting any closer to our longed for destination. Are we there yet? How much longer?

The disciples wanted to know this, too. But were afraid to ask. Keep in mind this passage comes late in John's gospel, Jesus will soon be arrested and put to death. The threefold "little while" of which he speaks is resurrection and three days, even three anguished filled ones, does seem to qualify as short termed delayed gratification. Jeremiah, on the other hand, is speaking to a people about to endure 70 years of exile. The "again" of God's full joy is going to take generations and some won't live to see it. What's the hope in here for them? What about for us hearing these words in the year of our Lord 2021, not in exile, but still in a pandemic and all its wrought, awaiting Christ's promised return when crying will be no more. What are we to do in the meantime? In this in-between time? This hard time?

What does Jesus-type-joy look like in the here and now? How do we rejoice with faith even as we wrestle with doubt and face real-time weeping and lament?

On a recent Sunday, it was September 12 to be exact, I was listening to the radio on the way to worship. Early on Sunday mornings on 88.5 the program with Heart and Voice plays scared music and it is a wonderful way to prepare to preach. On this particular morning, the memories of the day before were heavy. The twentieth anniversary of 9/11 commemorations retold painful story after painful story of loved ones lost as I pictured the images I was shocked to see all those years ago. My mood that morning was a mixture of eagerness to kick off our Fall schedule and heaviness at the state of the world past and present and likely future. Into this space the music of Kim Andre Arnesen's "There We Shall Rest" flooded. It washed over me. For a few minutes, transported me and I could not help but weep for the beauty and the pain of this world so closely mingled.

The text of this work is from Augustine's work "The City of God." The lyrics tell of heaven, of eternal peace, of contentment complete and unending. The voices soar as they sing:

There we shall rest. We shall rest. We shall see. We shall love. We shall love. We shall praise. Behold what we shall be at the end without end. For what other end do we have if not to reach the kingdom, the kingdom which has no end.

Resting. Seeing. Loving. Praising. Without ceasing. Without constraint. These are the things that make for joy. In the end, yes, but also right now. These are available to us, now, every day, even if only partially. I want to make joy more complicated, elaborate, demonstrative than resting in Christ and seeing the holy in the moment, loving the gifts of this life and worshipping their Creator, but sometimes God gives me a glimpse of eternal joy in an earthly setting and then, if only briefly, I realize that Jesus' promised presence is not just eternal, it is perpetual there. God's resurrection power is not only coming in a little while, it pulls us out of the tomb and away from the graveyards of our sorrow again and again and again.

My friend, a musician, who sings with a voice worthy of the heavenly choir, even though he struggles to speak without a studder, once asked me, out of nowhere, as we stood in the church gym holding our plates of pot roast and mashed potatoes at the Wednesday night supper: "Jill what do you do when you are overwhelmed with joy?"

I thought for a moment, but I knew exactly what feeling he was describing having only hours before been overcome by the beauty of a rainbow arched over the BI-LO parking lot.

"I weep," I said.

"Ah, yes," he said. "I understand."

His question was a gift because it made me consider when I've known the inbreaking of a joy that isn't situational or explicable. Instead, it is surprising, overwhelming and real. A rainbow over the BI-LO. My dad in his diminished state saying, "It is always good to see you." Children in their small masks playing in the sandbox. Joy is seeing grace or kindness or beauty and praising God for it. It is knowing love undeserved and accepting it. It is showing love, unconditional, and meaning it. It is resting in the promise of divine goodness and knowing when we stop achieving and striving and working the world will keep going. It is believing we are more than the sum of our doing and consuming, more than enough in our God-created being.

The prophet tells the people in exile: plant, wed, have children, seek the welfare of the people and place where you do not wish to be. Know I have plans for you. Plans for welfare, not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. I will bring you back, but in the meantime, rest, see the good, seek the good, be the good, give thanks for the interim gardens you plant, the impermanent places you build, the provisional homes you inhabit and know I am there with you. Not only in a little while – but right here and now.

Jesus says: In a little while, again, you will see me. And he says: Lo, I am with you always. When two or three are gathered, I am right in the middle of you. When you care for the least of these you will meet me face to face. Abide in my love and when you do I abide in you and no less than God dwells in you, too. Rest in this promise. Have eyes to see the kingdom on earth as it in heaven. Praise the Lord for the gift of *this* life, this time and space filled with so much worth weeping over, and lamenting about and working to heal and then you will know joy, full, if not yet complete.

Know it is faithful, no matter what is happening in you or in the world, to be overwhelmed with joy, to get lost in wonder, love and praise and weep not just for the pain of this world, but for its breath-taking beauty, too.

The poet Jane Kenyon, who died of leukemia at the age of 48, penned these beautiful, weep-worthy words entitled, "Otherwise"

*I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.  
It might have been  
otherwise. I ate  
cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill  
to the birch wood.  
All morning I did  
the work I love.  
At noon I lay down  
with my mate. It might  
have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together  
at a table with silver  
candlesticks. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed  
in a room with paintings  
on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.*

Joy comes with knowing, whatever today brings, it could be otherwise and relishing the interim, but nonetheless real good of this earthly life. Joy comes in knowing, whatever today brings, however hard, really hard, one day it will be otherwise. We shall rest. We shall see. We shall love. We shall praise. We shall reach the kingdom, together.

But today, in the meantime, in this in-between time, the Spirit gifts us with joy. And Jesus sends us to embody the joy he came to make complete for those who most need to be seen and find rest and know love and have cause to praise not just in the end, in the fullness of time, but right now in this often really hard time. So that we weep together, not only out of lament, but because we are overwhelmed with sweet milk and birch woods, watered gardens, tables laden with grain and wine, candle sticks and companionship, rainbows over the BI-LO, children playing, strangers praying, people we love simply glad to see us. Even in exile. Even before Christ comes again. Until we meet God face to face. Knowing the power of the Spirit is abundant, inexhaustible, eternal, present so we can rest and see and love and praise and know real joy, in the end, right now and always.

### **St. Augustine of Hippo: Resurrection Prayer**

All shall be Amen and Alleluia.

We shall rest and we shall see.

We shall see and we shall know.

We shall know and we shall love.

We shall love and we shall praise.

Behold our end, which is no end.