

SING FOR JOY

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matt. 11:2-11

There are many ways in which human life has been envisaged by poets and artists of all kinds: as a battle, as a sea voyage, as a quest, as a race. Sports lovers, especially football fans, will tell you that life is like a game, and from the game you can learn all sorts of lessons for living. One of the most persistent images for a human life is that of a journey. Anyone who sees the logic of a journey as a symbol for our lives must believe that life is not a settling down but rather that we are forever moving on to something anticipated but perhaps still unknown and unexplored, and that we are essentially pilgrims making our way. The metaphor of a journey is, of course, central to Jewish experience and thinking. The Jews took to the road in the exodus and have been, for one reason or another, on the road every since in search of a home, a safe abiding place, a place to return to from exile, a promised land. We see this played out in the words of Isaiah: “A *highway* shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.... And the ransomed of God shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.”

This is “joy Sunday,” Advent III, the pink candle day, and I would like to reflect with you on this theme of joy relative to the image of the highway. After all, we live in New Jersey and we’re a people always on the road. Roads and highways are everywhere in the Garden State, and for better or worse (worse, I guess) cars are lifeblood.

Years ago, when I was living in Upstate New York, I found myself nostalgic for my ancestral home here in Jersey, a condition made more acute when I listened to the music of the bard of New Jersey, Bruce Springsteen, an artist who was and is deeply attached to the image of the road as describing life's journey and a means to human freedom. And never more is this the case than in Springsteen's great paean to the highway, "Born to Run." Here is Springsteen, now almost as old as I am, in 1975, a scruffy guy of 26.

"In the day we sweat it out on the streets of a runaway American dream

At night we ride through mansions of glory in suicide machines

Sprung from cages on Highway 9

Chrome wheeled, fuel injected

And steppin' out over the line.

Baby, this town rips the bones from your back

It's a death trap, it's a suicide rap

We gotta get out while we're young

'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run.

The highways jammed with broken heroes

On a last chance power drive

Everybody's out on the run tonight

But there's no place left to hide

Together, Wendy, we can live with the sadness

I'll love you with all the madness in my soul

Someday, girl, I don't know when, we're gonna get to that place
Where we really want to go
And we'll walk in the sun
But till then tramps like us
Baby we were born to run.

That's just the first and last verses, but you can in these see the prominence of the image of the highway, the road, the journey, the yearning. And in these two verses, played at a feverish speed, you get a sense of the joy, the sheer exhilaration that comes of hitting the road, and if you know the song, and especially if you have ever seen it performed, you know that this is fundamentally a song expressing the joy that comes of being free, cast in the poetry of teenage angst. There's a certain desperation, even sadness in "Tramps like us, baby we were born to run," but there is also the joy of making the run, being on the road. Be careful if the song comes on the radio when you're driving, because you might find yourself speeding up, unable to resist the energy of this anthem to human freedom. You might roll down your window. You might find yourself smiling. You might break into song.

Why is he going on about an old rock 'n roll song on the pink Sunday, you are asking? What does "Born to Run" have to do with the Advent of Christ? Well, nothing in particular, except perhaps to offer an instance of evident joy that is out there in the culture and available to all of us and maybe not entirely irrelevant to Isaiah's highway called the Holy Way. Oh, yes, and one other thing, it is joy expressed through music,

which, to my thinking, is the art form best able to reflect the experience of joy. There are many reasons to sing, and not least of them is that we would sing for joy.

Let's try a completely different musical expression of joy, this one from the 20th century composer Ottorino Respighi in his 1930 piece "Lauda for the Nativity of the Lord" in which the following is sung by Mary, mother of Jesus:

"Oh, sweet and darling son of mine,
You were born of me so poor!
Joseph the old man
who is your guardian, has fallen asleep here.
My son, perfect joy
I felt at your birth!
As I hugged you,
I did not care about poverty,
for you give me so much sweetness
with your eternal joy.
O tender little son!

Shepherds sing: God, since you have deigned
to be born today in such poverty
give light to all people,
and no one will be ungrateful for such a gift.

They sing to Mary: Joyful we will leave
if we can touch him for a moment.
This favor we ask of you,

we who are only shepherds,
only simple shepherds.”

Here is an expression of joy that is more obviously tied to the story of the Nativity of Jesus. The words, attributed to a medieval monk, are lovely and direct, but once again, it is the music that conveys the feeling and invites us to share the joy of which the words speak, an *unspeakable* joy. Unlike Springsteen’s “Born to Run,” which is big and boisterous, the highway an expression of the joy of being alive, the piece by Respighi is quiet and contemplative, the expression of the joy of humble pilgrims who have come to a destination, come to a mother, herself a pilgrim, to whom a child has been born, and who rejoice with her at this birth.

Our faith urges us to be joyful in anticipation of Christmas. I have tried to suggest to you the energy of joy which is not simply mirth or even happiness, but a fullness of feeling that is perhaps best recognized and expressed in the pouring forth of song. And so in this season we sing for joy that the light of God has come and is coming. Tramps like us. Shepherds like us. On the Holy Way. Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2010

Emanuel Lutheran Church