

I'VE GOT THE JOY, JOY, JOY, JOY...

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Genesis 1:1-5; Luke 19:1-10

Genesis 1:1-5 (from *The Message*)

1 First this: God created the Heavens and Earth - all you see, all you don't see. 2 Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss. 3 God spoke: "Light!" And light appeared. 4 God saw that light was good and separated light from dark. 5 God named the light Day, he named the dark Night. It was evening, it was morning - Day One.

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

"In the beginning there was a giant laugh..." It's not the way the story starts, but it's what I sometimes imagine. The 18th century preacher Jonathan Edwards described the process of creation as like an "infinite fountain of good...and love... joy and happiness" that "send[s] forth abundant streams" flowing out, like "beams from the sun."¹ Sounds like a giant laugh to me. That kind of laugh that erupts embarrassingly out of a proper silence. The kind of laugh that starts deep down in the belly and you try to stifle it but there's just no stopping it, and so it bursts out spectacularly loud and ostentatiously and once it gets going it's impossible to stop. The kind of laugh that makes everyone around you laugh at your laugh, even if they don't know why you're laughing in the first place, and pretty soon the whole place is rolling around and tears are streaming down your face and you have to force yourself to take intentional breaths just to calm down. God's giant laugh, emerging from an irrepressible joy that could not be held in; that could not be kept only for God's self; that had to be shared. Light pouring out in abundant streams from a soup of nothingness, an inky blackness.

And so that joy spilled out with an abundance of generosity that can scarcely be comprehended in all its fullness across the spans of time. Streams and rivers and oceans and waterfalls and rain. Trees and flowers and plants and tiny buds and falling leaves and glorious colors everywhere. Fish and worms and giant whales and tiny snails. And glorious birds, humming at a flower or soaring across the waters or guarding a nest. Cows, horses, elephants, mice, cats, and dogs. It's the laugh that got started and never ended, so great was the desire to share this joy.

And then, knit together by the divine hands, molded from the very soil of the earth, emerging inexplicably and yet methodically from the great parade of species throughout the ages: the gift of human life itself—of our very lives—with an almost limitless capacity to evolve and think and learn

¹ Jonathan Edwards, "Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World" (1765).

and create. God must have had so much fun with that! Gift after gift after gift poured into the human experience: relationship, imagination, playfulness, love, energy; bodies that can dance and climb mountains and hold hands and paint and sing; minds that can add and subtract, invent a story, solve a mystery. All these things—all these miraculous things—situated in a man or a woman or a child. In *you*. How can we even begin to comprehend the abundance of God's joyful generosity?

And yet there it was, so concretely and audibly and uncontainably present in old Sarah's irreverent laugh as she overheard the angel tell Abraham she would bear a child. What silliness, what scandal! The gift she could no longer imagine receiving, pouring forth abundantly from the fountain of God's great joy. A laugh that reverberated again and again throughout the history of God's people: Hannah's prayer answered in Samuel; Elizabeth's barrenness upended by her son John, the Baptist; a child dancing in Mary's virgin womb. Such ordinary lives infused with such extraordinary grace.

And there it was again, in Miriam's dance after the exodus—evidence of that generous fountain of joy spilling over into streams of liberation and deliverance. Rescued from slavery, brought into the divine relationship, led to a new and abundant land. A God whose first, joyful laugh never fades, but hears and responds, even and especially to the smallest, least powerful voice.

And there it was again, in the rise of a nation from the humblest beginnings. Shepherds who became kings! A people given identity and community and the gift of laws that bound them together in their love for God and neighbor. Psalms written that echoed the abundant joy of a God who continually creates and recreates: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; and it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced." (Psalm 126:1-3)

And there it was again, in the prophets who assured the people of God's steadfast love for them, even in the midst of estrangement and exile. The world was filled with abuse and suffering; the nation crumbled; the people lost their way and their homeland. It felt as though pain and despair was all they would ever know. But somehow, joy finds its way through, streams of that first light penetrating the darkness, bringing forth laughter from a place where it seemed the tears would never cease. God's boundless generosity manifest first in a vision of hope: "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight." (Isaiah 65:18) And then, the generosity of restoration and return. Have you not known that to be true?

And is there any laugh more boisterous, any joy more uncontained, any generosity more abundant than God joining us on earth? God mixing in with the creation—with people and food and music and art and walking and talking and human love. It's so mind-boggling, so contrary to our understanding of space and time, of the division between human and divine, of how we are born and live and die—and even more baffling to our sense of what joy involves. Because we find paradox in calling it "Good" Friday, confusion that anyone would deem us worthy of such sacrifice. But in Jesus, God had the last laugh that is a new beginning for all of us. In the cross and the empty tomb, we are confronted with a generosity beyond measure, a re-creation that insists, over and against every power of darkness, that God's light has never ceased to stream forth from that first moment God spoke out of the nothingness. God gives and gives and gives from a joy that never ends.

And there it was again in a man named Zacchaeus. We don't know much about him, but we know these things: he was rich, he was a tax collector – the chief tax collector – and he was short in stature. As I stand on a little block behind this pulpit so that I can more easily see all of you, I feel a kinship with this man who had to climb a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus! So there he was, up in a tree waiting for the Son of God to walk by. We can't know what Zacchaeus was looking for that day, what he was hoping to see or learn or experience. It might have just been curiosity, a desire to check out

this man around whom there was some buzz. After all, just before Jesus had entered Jericho, he had healed a blind beggar in front of the crowd. So it's not surprising that a crowd had gathered in Jericho, or that Zacchaeus might want to see. What he surely was not expecting was that Jesus would stop near that sycamore tree, look right at Zacchaeus oddly perched up there, and call him by name. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

It was a moment of extraordinary generosity. For Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, to be singled out by this healer and teacher, by this man who seemed to be so much more than that, by one who had been talking about prioritizing the poor and the powerless—it was, quite simply, a gift. Zacchaeus the despised, Zacchaeus the sinner, Zacchaeus the lost—to be host to such a man as Jesus, who would soon be entering Jerusalem triumphantly, with crowds joyfully receiving him. It was not a gift Zacchaeus had earned; it was a gift, in fact, that he did not deserve—all part of the grumbling, I am sure, that occupied the reaction of others to the choosing of Zacchaeus. To be a rich man who collected money for a living, dangling from a tree, and to be not just acknowledged but invited into relationship with the savior. Can you not imagine God joyful laugh about it all?

You see, it's all part of that fountain of joy, bubbling up out of the very being of God into the nothingness, and overflowing into the most unexpected places, the most unlikely moments, the most unusual people. Generosity and joy woven together throughout time and piercing like sunbeams into corners no one would imagine. The generosity of life itself, of being here, of knowing that we have some part in the world; that no matter how unlikely and foolish and silly it seems, God made us, too.

And so we find ourselves, here in God's house, faced with the recognition that we ourselves have flowed out of God's very self, out of God's abundant joy. That we are both products and recipients of that great generosity. God looks up, and sees us, each of us, and calls us by name. I have no doubt that there is great delight in that moment for God, as well as for us.

The response is up to us. When we confront God's generosity—when we recognize it in the creation and the abundance around us; in the time after time that God has turned mourning into joy and blindness into sight; in meeting Jesus along the road; when we confront God's generosity in our very selves...what else can we do but leap out of the tree, run home, and prepare to welcome him? The joy is now ours! That recognition of God's generosity is just the beginning, our first laugh at the wonder of it all, of being given a chance at life, of being given a chance at new life, again and again. And when we keep laughing, even through our tears; when the joy bubbles up through us, and we stand before the Lord in our very home—or in *this* very home—we are part of the fountain. "*Look, half my possessions, Lord...*" It is, then, *our* privilege to give and give and give, with a great joy that never ends. Can you imagine all that will come—that will continue to come—as we go forward with that kind of joy, together?