

Text: *Isaiah* 35:8&10 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. . .Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

### JOY PURSUES THE CHRISTIAN

**Introduction:** I grew up in a proper Scots-Presbyterian household. It provided me with a pleasant childhood, but joy was not an emotion that was much in supply. Actually, joy was viewed with some degree of suspicion. It was a bit like a public display of affection. One could deal with happiness, as long as it was properly moderated, but overt displays of joy probably meant that you were up to no good. And, of course, I frequently was! God was not against people enjoying themselves, but he, a very masculine “he” I might add, took a dim view of needless frivolity. Scots were not called dour by chance.

Then I became an Episcopalian. A church in which doing things to excess was normal. There was even a name for it. Being High Church. If a couple of candles were sufficient, having a raft of them was Episcopal. Adding bells and smells to an already elaborate communion service was good form. Getting away from good King James to a modern translation of the Bible opened up new spiritual possibilities. Among those possibilities was the notion that not only was joy permissible, but that joy actually pursued Christians (at least Episcopal Christians). The prophet Isaiah reminds us that if you are traveling the holy highway, gladness and joy will overtake you.

For those of us living in Texas we know that for every good road, straight, true and preferably high speed, there is a toll. So, what is the toll for this highway on which we travel with joy overtaking us? It must be steep indeed. Wonder of wonders, we discover that the toll has been paid, once and for all, by Jesus on the cross. Our only cost is belief. Belief in a story of human redemption through godly sacrifice.

Isaiah tell us that wicked fools will not go about on that road. Well, obviously Isaiah did not know me! I have belief, fueled by faith, but as I travel that holy way, I am often taking detours by looking for convenient off ramps. These off ramps, as tempting as they are, always takes one away from joy.

**One off-ramp is marked greed:** Greed is not just about the pursuit of money; although obsessing on the acquisition of more material goods than you could possibly need is one form of greed. One may be greedy for recognition. These are the people who always want the spotlight to fall on them. Remember the little kid in grade school who always raised their hand to be recognized by the teacher? Some of us went on to make whole careers out of waving our hands! These folks may be teachers, comedians, performers or athletes – but their obsession with self is usually not too destructive. There are other forms of greed that are not so benign. The pursuit of power is an example. Whether an autocrat in politics or an abuser in the family, the person greedy for power is destructive. Motivation, of course, needs to be examined. The why of attention or power determines the sinfulness of the actions. We should also remember that the greed detour may be an off ramp that leads to a bit of over indulgence or it might lead to total degeneration. The only safe judgement to make here is probably to judge ourselves.

As we travel the holy way, overtaken by joy, we also may be tempted by an **off-ramp labelled toxic people:** I have gone down this off ramp willingly, indeed, even eagerly, in search of novelty, adventure or even an interesting drinking companion. Occasionally I steered down the off ramp knowing full well that I was headed for a toxic interaction, but could not think of an honorable way to avoid it.

This latter category tended to be populated by relatives. I remember one dear aunt who managed to do- in two husbands and spent her last fifty years going from the house of one relative to another carrying tales designed to foment discord. Aunt Amelia died on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. I am sure that she told God, in no uncertain terms, that she had to make it to her 100<sup>th</sup> or He would never hear the end of it. God, in his infinite wisdom, let her have her way.

Generally speaking, toxic people bring out the worst in us. At least in my case, they can unlock hurts that had been healed for many years, prejudices that I had overcome, and feelings of inferiority or superiority that I had developed wonderful defense mechanisms for. Whoever they are, and however we respond to them, toxic people certainly rob us of the joy that comes naturally to Christians. One must end the detour as soon as possible and return to the holy way.

A final off ramp that deprives us of joy is **personally negative spiritual/mental space**. This is a tricky off ramp because it appears suddenly and compellingly, even though it is not on the road map at all. I am not talking about clinical depression, that is a matter for medical intervention. I am talking about what one generation called a "blue funk." A western friend of mine described it as a feeling that you needed to "sit up on your hind legs and howl!" It may be when we see all of the bad things taking place around us and we are blinded to the good. It could be as simple as experiencing the all too normal ups and downs of life and, deciding to forego God's healing help, begin to wallow in grief and misery. All of us take this detour from time to time and we usually find our way back to the Holy road fairly quickly. Other poor souls make a life-time commitment to traveling down this lonely road of despair. God help them, and she would, if only they would let her.

All of you could tell of your own detours and your means to return to the holy road. God builds the highway, but we must map it ourselves. Joy is the natural state of the Christian. As the preacher says in *Ecclesiastes (5:18-20)* "After looking at the way things are on this earth, here's what I've decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have for as long as God gives you life. And that's about it. That's the human lot. Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what's given and delighting in the work. It's God's gift! God deals out joy in the present, the *now*. It's useless to brood over how long we might live." The end of the lesson: Get on the Holy Road, make as few detours as possible and let God's joy catch up with you. Amen