

The high cost of happiness

Isaiah 55:1-13

December 24, 2006

*Come, everyone who is thirsty --
here is water!
Come, you that have no money --
buy grain and eat!
Come! Buy wine and milk --
it will cost you nothing!
Why spend money on what does not satisfy?
Why spend your wages and still be hungry?
Listen now, my people, and come to me;
come to me, and you will have life!*

These are the words of the Lord to you. I pray that you will hear them ... and that my words will not get in the way.

*We wish you a merry Christmas,
we wish you a merry Christmas,
we wish you a merry Christmas,
and a happy new year!*

We wish you a Christmas that is merry, and a new year that is happy.

What will make Christmas merry? Lots of laughter and singing. Lots of good food. Lots of dear ones gathered around you. Lots of meaningful gifts given and received.

What will make your new year happy? Good health. Fulfillment and success in your work. Plenty of opportunities to play. Plenty of opportunities to spend time with those you love.

Fewer acts of terrorism. Lessened violence in Iraq and Palestine. A Republican president and a Democratic congress working together for the greater good of the nation, and the world.

Watching your children grow up. Watching your children do well. Spending some precious moments with your grandchild. Spending some precious moments with your dog!

Will our wish for you come true? Will your Christmas be merry? Will your new year be happy? We will just have to wait and see what happens ... But most of us will not just wait and see what happens! We don't wait for happiness to find us. We pursue it! The pursuit of happiness is built into our DNA, as a nation and as a human race. It makes our short list of the inalienable rights of all human beings: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Pursuit of Happiness is also the title of a new movie, featuring Will Smith and his real-life son. I have not yet seen the film, but understand it is about the pursuit -- not so much about the destination, but about the journey itself -- about the costs of continuing the pursuit, the costs and rewards of not giving up on your dreams.

We do pursue happiness, despite its high cost. We will do our best to make Christmas merry: hanging the lights, trimming the tree, baking the cookies, thinking about the presents, buying the presents, spending more than we planned for the presents, inviting the relatives, traveling to see the relatives. It will take time and effort, it will cost us lots of money and lots of energy, but we do it gladly because a merry Christmas is worth the investment.

We will do our best to make the new year happy. We will work hard at our jobs, or we will look for new ones that will better challenge us and satisfy our need for meaningful work. We will rededicate ourselves to a healthy lifestyle, eating less and exercising more, watching less TV and reading more, complaining less and praying more. We will plan vacations and visits to friends and relatives. We will buy tickets for movies and concerts and football games. We will make time for play. We will make time for service. We will make time for family. It will take planning and discipline, it will cost us money and energy and time, it will involve some risk, but we do it anyway because a happy new year is worth the investment.

We are willing to pay a high cost for happiness, because the result is worth it. But the result is not guaranteed.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, Christmas is not merry, the new year is not happy. Circumstances get in the way. People don't cooperate. Bad things happen. Sometimes we get in our own way, putting our expectations too high or being unrealistic about what we are capable of doing. Sometimes the inertia of life itself wears us down. Our happiness is sucked dry by the unchanging routine, the tedious repetition of seemingly meaningless tasks.

Sometimes we find happiness only to lose it. An illness or a death takes it away. We lose a job or have an accident. A war or a hurricane intervenes. We are let down by a friend or we let down a friend. Happiness is fragile, and once it is broken it will cost us all the more to restore it. It will require working through rehab or working through grief, making sacrifices or offering forgiveness, adjusting our lifestyles or changing our minds.

And sometimes, sometimes, we arrive at the happiness we are pursuing only to find it's not what we thought it would be. We're happy, but something is still missing. We're happy, but we are still restless. Something still eludes us, something that we want more than anything else, even if we cannot give it a name.

*Why spend money on what does not satisfy?
Why spend your wages and still be hungry?*

We spend a great deal, investing money and time, physical energy and emotional energy, in the pursuit of happiness, but even so, there is still a hunger, still a longing. How shall we describe it?

It's a longing for meaning. Being happy isn't enough. We want to know that what we do matters.

It's a longing for value. What we have or what we do may make us happy, but we want to know that we are valued for some other reason than the things we have acquired or the feats we have accomplished.

It's a longing for beauty, the kind of beauty C. S. Lewis describes:

We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words -- to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves. to bathe in it, to become part of it ...

It's a longing for relationship. Augustine said: *Our hearts are restless, until they find rest in you.*

It's a longing for joy ...

I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born -- Christ the Lord!

There it is! This is what we are longing for! It's there for you! It's there for all people! And it will cost you ... nothing! It's not about our effort, but about God's gift, not about making something good out of our lives, but about enjoying the goodness of God's gift of life itself.

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It will cost you nothing! It's not that all our efforts pursuing happiness are wasted. On the contrary, when our minds and hearts are filled with joy, we are eager to pursue happiness all the more, as a way of sharing God's delight in all of creation.

Joy is the constant, the still point, the foundation, that holds us up and keeps us going through the ups and downs of a lifetime. Happiness is fragile, but joy is enduring. Happiness is fleeting, but joy is permanent. Happiness is fickle, but joy is always there.

Joy is ...

- ... seeing the reflection of the Creator in all that He has made.
- ... knowing that life is a precious gift in itself, regardless of whatever happiness or unhappiness may come our way.
- ... knowing that there is nothing that can ever separate us from the love of God which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.
- ... believing that all of creation, and ourselves, will one day be made new
- ... offering God our thanks and praise, for no other reason than it brings us joy to do it.

So, if it's all right with you, this year I will not wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year, but a joyful Christmas and a joyful new year, a Christmas and a new year filled with joy. Joy that will not diminish. Joy that is not fragile or fickle. Joy that will last you a lifetime ... and more! Joy because God is among us, Jesus is here.

And Jesus is on the move! Jesus doesn't remain long in the cradle, but moves out into the world, bringing a message and a power that changes everything. Jesus is on the move! Do you want to go with him? Let's go!