



“Tears of Joy”

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Second Sunday of Advent

I want to begin this morning the same way I begin my children’s sermons...with a question. What’s your favorite fairy tale? Now I’m not going to call on folks but I do want you to think about the question. Is it *Cinderella*? How about *Snow White*? Or *Sleeping Beauty*? *Pinocchio*? *Bambi*? *Beauty and the Beast*? *Lion King*? *Aladdin*?...

I think my favorite is *Beauty and the Beast*. Any children’s movie that can work in the word “expectorating” deserves special kudos. Yes, when the main villain, Gaston, sings proudly about his spitting prowess...I was impressed.

Now, I want you to continue to think about these fairy tales...This time I want you to think about something they all have in common. And let me give you a hint...it’s not that they are all Disney movies.

The answer is that they all end the same way...the heroes and heroines live “happily ever after.”

But this makes sense doesn’t it? We want our kids to be optimistic...to believe that things will end well. After all, these are usually scary stories. The bad guys and girls are really bad. I’m talking about serious jealousy and greed...and usually cold-blooded murder....

Just think about it...a poisoned apple, a wicked stepmother, a vengeful expectorator, a jealous queen, a murderous brother of the king...men and women who will do anything to get what they want.

No...we don’t want our kids to be scared...so these stories had better end well. We don’t want our kids having nightmares.

“Happily ever after” is a great idea. It’s not just our kids who we want to be optimistic. We too want justice to win out...we want our heroes and heroines to live “happily ever after.”

But these fairy tales are not Pollyanna-ish...in some respects, they are quite realistic. Don’t the protagonists always have to go through intense trials to achieve “happily ever after”? It’s never easy. Just think about Simba...Aladdin...or the Beauty...or Bambi...they all show great courage.

Clearly one of the messages from these stories is that life isn’t easy...that the hurdles are serious. But the message is also that you can do it...good people can achieve worthy goals...good people can get to “happily ever after.”

When Lynn and I were first married there was a popular TV show called *The Love Boat*. Now I shouldn’t admit this but we used to watch the *Love Boat* regularly. The pattern of each show was always the same. There would be a few couples going on a cruise...on the *Love Boat* of course...and invariably, these couples encounter problems in their relationships.

But luckily these couples were on the *Love Boat*...and luckily these troubled couples had the wise Captain Stubbing and his crew at their service...including my personal favorite, Gopher...yes the Captain and his crew were there to help solve the passengers personal problems...and they were efficient...remarkably, every week those problems were solved by the end of the hour long show. Always a happy ending...the show always ended with the couples marching off the boat headed for "happily ever after."

Yes, week after week, the show ended exactly the same way.

Now here's something else I shouldn't admit. Like clockwork, at the end of the every show...no matter what...I'd have tears rolling down my cheek. It didn't matter how dumb the show was...and they were usually quite dumb...it always ended the same way for me.

As my kids will tell you, these tears are not confined to the *Love Boat*...my reaction is the same for every schmaltzy happy ending...and its not subtle...it's not something I am able to hide.

And I'm sure you can now imagine what its like to watch Christmas movies with me. *It's a Wonderful Life*. *White Christmas*. And our family favorite, *The Santa Clause*. It doesn't matter how many times I've seen them...

Being a reasonably introspective person, I've frequently wondered why I fall so hard for these movies. So far I never have come up with a good answer.

But I did have a bit of an epiphany recently...an epiphany that relates this tearful habit of mine to one of the things that first attracted me to Christianity. Its about what Jesus taught me...what Jesus teaches all of us...that we can have a happy ending too. Yes, I love redemptive optimism.

It may sound trite to compare Christianity to fairy tales and Christmas movies...but the premise is similar...you can achieve redemption...that is the message of fairy tales...and it's certainly the message of Christianity...Yes, God will forgive you...all you have to do is ask.

Some years ago, I was having a personal religious re-awakening....really getting back into the church...at the time I read a book called *The World's Religions* by Huston Smith. And in the chapter on Christianity, Smith made a comment that surprised me...and has stuck with me.

Smith was speaking about the way the earliest Christians lived their lives...and keep in mind that these early Christians were at the absolute bottom of the totem pole in the brutal Roman Empire...their faith was outlawed...many were martyred...on the surface, they led miserable lives...that often ended miserably.

Smith talks about two qualities these early Christians exhibited. The first was a sense of community or as Smith says "mutual regard." They broke down social barriers and simply loved each other.

But it was the second quality that I was surprised by. Joy! These early Christians exhibited a surprising joy in the midst of a nasty life. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his followers that his teachings were designed so that his joy "may be in you, and your joy may be complete."

What caused this joy? These earliest Christians felt that with God's love and forgiveness of their sins, they were guaranteed redemption...they would, as the Gospel of John says, be able to have "life everlasting." Now that's a happy ending.

They had confidence that no matter what happened...no matter how bad their luck...that God loved them and would take care of them. With this confidence, they were able to enjoy the ride a lot more.

And I think it's fair to say that this attitude was what enabled Christianity to grow. Others must have looked at this joy in the midst of challenging times and said "I want some of that."

I often find that in order to get a sense of how things work, it is helpful to look at the most exaggerated examples. With that in mind, let's talk a little more about these early Christians...in particular about how some were martyred. Let me tell you about a young woman who lived in Carthage in the early 200s CE...named Perpetua...or St. Perpetua.

She was a convert to Christianity who came from a well-connected family. She was arrested for practicing Christianity and condemned to die. Perpetua's father tried in vain to get her to renounce her faith...so she could be spared the death many Christians suffered at the time...being torn apart by beasts for entertainment. Her father begged but Perpetua refused. She said, "neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian." I think you can imagine how the story ends.

Here was one of many such stories...stories of believers who refused to fear death...refused to turn on their faith. But regardless of how practical we think these martyrs were...we have to marvel at the power that gave them this courage.

Christianity has had the power to do this for people since its earliest days. In America's history, this kind of courage and steadfast belief is best seen in the slave communities. Christian faith helped many slaves deal with their brutal lives...thanks to the certainty that there were better times ahead...certainty that despite evidence to the contrary, God loved them...and that there would be a happy ending.

Now I'm certainly not making light of the brutal circumstances of these martyrs, slaves...not to mention the many, many people who have been carried through tough times by their Christian faith...but I think there is a parallel here to fairy tales. And the parallel is that getting to a happy ending isn't always easy. In all of these fairy tales, the path to "happily ever after" is treacherous.

Now I want to pause again to ask you to think about these fairy tales some more...I want you to think about something else that these fairy tales all have in common.

The answer is that sequels don't work. And the same is true of those Christmas movies. Have you ever seen *The Santa Clause 2*?

I think the reason these sequels don't work is actually pretty logical. How can you interrupt "happily ever after"? When you start trying to define what "happily ever after" means, things get complicated.

Now the basic idea of Christianity is that we achieve salvation or redemption...new life...life everlasting...through our humble admission of sin and belief that God through Jesus is ready to take us in. But when we start to think about what happens next...what life everlasting means...when we get into the details...things get tricky. To take it one step further, when we try to label redemption as *heaven*, we are in particularly tricky territory.

And we don't get much of an idea by looking at the Bible. In fact, the Gospels only speak of salvation six times. Paul speaks about salvation many times but doesn't really explain what it means with any precision. And while we know from the Gospels that the Kingdom of Heaven is a righteous idea, again there is no real attempt to go into detail.

It seems that Scripture leaves this idea of "happily ever after" to our imaginations.

Now in some corners of Christianity, there is the belief that we are promised a wonderful life if only we believe...some even suggesting that this promise incorporates prosperity. But when I look at the real world...for example, at the starving in Africa...or even the poor in America, just to name a couple...Yes, when I look at our unfair world, I personally find it hard to believe that its that simple...that its that Pollyanna-ish.

But I do believe...I believe that God is fair. And because of this confidence in God's fairness, I believe God will in some way even things out. I have confidence that our God who loves us will in some unknown way make things right. Yes, I believe in salvation...I just don't know what it looks like.

And while I don't have any idea how or when...I have this abiding faith that God will do it. And while this isn't in the same league as the amazing courage of the likes of Perpetua, it is a faith that enables me to know that things are going to be OK. I don't know how or when...I just know things will be OK.

One of my favorite songs is by Eric Clapton...I'm sure many of you have heard it...its called *Tears in Heaven*. It's a moving song about Clapton's son who died tragically...he sings about his hopes of seeing his son in heaven. Every time I hear it...I well up. It's a sad story and I'm sure the song was cathartic for Clapton. My guess is that it gave him a sense of reconciliation to his son and God.

Yes, I well up. And these of tears of empathy and sadness are, of course, important. I'm sure Clapton shed many.

But these are not the kind of tears I've been talking about today. Instead, I'm talking about...tears of joy.

Yes, I'm talking about the kind of tears that happen when you know...you just know it's going to be OK. You just know that God is there with you...you just know that no matter what, God is there for you. Or to borrow a phrase from a benediction that many of you have heard before...it's a benediction that has meant so much to me:

“There is no valley so low,
no wilderness so vast,
no passage so crooked,
that God is not already there
waiting to be with you”

Now, it's clear that life isn't easy. The Bible itself doesn't promise that life will be easy. And all you have to do is open up the newspaper...or turn on the TV...to know that things don't appear to be getting any easier.

But as the wisdom of our Fairy Tales tell us...as our favorite Christmas movies tell us...and infinitely more importantly, as our Scripture and 2,000 years of Christianity tell us...and yes, as Jesus tells us...we will get through it. Believing this makes all the difference in the world.

We may not know what “happily ever after” will look like...but we know its coming. Get those Kleenex boxes ready.

Amen.