

Deuteronomy 16:13-15

16:13 “You shall keep the Festival of Booths^[a] for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your winepress.

16:14 Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female servants, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns.

16:15 Seven days you shall keep the festival to the Lord your God at the place that the Lord will choose, for the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate.

Homily: A Harvest of Joy:

I want to begin this morning with a quick thought about the sacred texts we explore each week.

I do not personally believe that the purpose of our canon is to prove the existence of God. I do not personally subscribe to the idea that our two testaments are a final, comprehensive, indisputable, scientific, historical, and factual analysis of all that God has done and will do. And I definitely don't believe the Christian Bible's lasting purpose is to promote the superiority and chosen-ness of one specific people group. I also understand that our canon has been used, and continues to be used in damaging and traumatic ways.

But I will tell you, unapologetically and unequivocally, that I can think of no other consortium of writings that has so profoundly affected my life,

and has so adequately revealed for me the nature and character of a loving, imaginative, and joyful God.

Our sacred texts are revelatory for me, because they help me to both remember and experience the presence of God. These sacred texts bear witness, in raw and vulnerable, and sometimes even painful ways to God's vested interest in creation. And honestly, strange as it may seem, I see a kind of humanity in their imperfection – the scriptures are as wonderfully-flawed, and as wonderfully-complex and as wonderfully-contradictory as the humans that wrote them, and as you and me, the humans that read them!!! Thanks be to God!!!

So what then, you might ask, does all of this rambling have to do with this morning's text, and with this theme of joy in the Advent season.

In this Advent season, we are preparing and making ready our hearts to receive God's presence. We are attuning ourselves to be open to and to be a part of the new things God is doing in the world. The hymn we sang earlier reiterates this ideal: Joy to the world! The Lord is come!!!

Too often, in these modern times, I believe we've tried to make our canon something it isn't. We want the Christmas story, and so many others, to be sourced by the Associated Press or some other accredited media outlet. But faith stories aren't journalistic stories, they are experiential stories. They are stories that invite us to imagine the many ways God dwells with humanity across space and time.

What's more, too many of us Christians have distanced ourselves from Jewish practices that help to illumine and connect us to ancient texts. The English language isn't throaty like Hebrew – words like bird, and wind, and spirit don't often sound like the objects they describe. And

try as they may, our redacted versions of texts often hide the brilliance and creativity of an author's literary structure and thematic intent. But most of all, we are removed from the teaching liturgies and pedagogies through which so many of our ancestors first heard the stories.

The Passover Celebration with its bitter herbs, and unleavened bread, and spoken seders recounts God's salvific, space-giving acts in the escape from Egypt. Purim, with its strong drink, and playful chants, and even colorful masks, brings to life God's saving hand, through Queen Esther, in protecting faithful people from Haman's wrath. And the Festival of the Booths, recounts a *sukkot* people. For forty years, they lived in huts, and they roamed strange lands, but God offered manna in the wilderness. Not wanting to forget such generosity, the people made booths out of branches, and flowers, and they ate together, and rejoiced in God's constant presence.

What's really happening in these stories, if we allow them to be vehicles of space and grace, is that we're remembering, perhaps even imagining how God has dwelled among people just like us; how God has empowered people just like us; how God loves people just like us; how God equips people just like us with unique gifts and affords them creative purpose. And if we can somehow, someday see ourselves in such people, we will also eventually see how God is doing the same for each of us, and for all our neighbors.

God is freeing us to move in spaces where we feel trapped; God is providing us with faithful women and men who are working for God's good purposes; God is feeding us, and sheltering us, and making a harvest in every season.

I'm not suggesting that the best way for one to prepare to experience God's joy during Advent is to build a booth in your backyard, though I don't think it's a bad idea. We would do well to be intentional in remembering the source of our abundance.

I am, however, intrigued by the notion of harvest. In the pages of our canon, we will find thousands of examples of people who received the presence of God with purpose. And here in this congregation, we will find dozens, perhaps even hundreds of women and men, and little ones, too, who reveal the nature and character of God's love to us and for us. And yes, someday, and especially in a harried pre-Christmas season, we feel a bit broken and battered. But somehow there are still mothers, both youthful and seasoned, who dare to hope; and there are still women who wage peace because it's too important not to, and there are still neighbors, who help us find abundance, even in messiness, and remind us to sit at a table, and rejoice together.

And in this season, lowly ones sing mighty songs. And rage-filled kings heed the advice of peace-determined maidens and sheathe their swords. And flaky manna and morning dew appear in foreign lands.

And joy abounds. Because when we tell the story, we're also invited to become part of it. And joy abounds, because, soon...soon, soon, soon and very soon, we will see a star settle over a little town and greet the best kind of trouble-maker.

Millbrook Baptist Church, may we find joy in the old, old story that reimagines itself in new, new ways!!! Perhaps we may begin such a process today, at the table in front of us. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.