

Doubtful Ice
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 Fourth Sunday in Advent: JOY

Winter, 1959. We had been living in Chase Hall at Fryeburg Academy, Fessenden House, the Headmaster's residence, had sustained a fire started by an un-emptied floor sander on the second floor—it burned through the floor and into the dining room—and was caught before the whole house became engulfed. There was a notable cold snap and Keyes Pond was a splendid sheet of black ice. I, recently relocated from Texas, had never seen anything like it. But Mom and Dad bought us skates, and took us to experience skating on this enormous natural rink. My ankles were weak and the skates too wide—it was a wobbly and unsteady start for me but Dad taught me how to skate that day. You have to strap on the skates, find your balance and push out; it takes some practice to obtain mastery! (Oh, and knowing how to fall is really important.)

I realized that day why Mom and Dad had fallen in love with Dad. He was magic on the ice. He flew across the pond, he skated with Mom and he took graceful arcs and distance was altered before my eyes. I had never seen anyone go so far so fast in such a short time! He grew up skating, playing pick-up hockey on the Exeter river in Durham N. H. Skating on a river is much chancier than skating on a frozen pond, although thin ice could be found over the springs that feed a pond. It's good to be careful. It is crucial to avoid venturing onto doubtful ice—ice not hard, or thick enough to sustain your whole weight! Still, nothing has ever dimmed the awesome beauty of seeing my parents skating together that January day in 1959.

Approaching “Joy” this Advent Season, I was struck by how some Christians approach their faith as if it were “doubtful ice,” as if it were not solid, or firm enough to bear their weight, or, the weight of their existence. Are you trusting entirely, or is your approach timid and tentative?

I had a few hurdles to overcome in sermon preparation. The first was Nehemiah 8:10, frequently translated **The joy of the Lord is my strength**. I didn't know how to skate with that! A more literal translation reads: **Delight in Jehovah is a strong refuge**. Pray notice the significant shift of focus: **my strength** and **my joy** is better centered in God, **delight in Jehovah**, that is a strong refuge. If our confidence is in God, that trumps self-confidence in every way! Let's review Matt. 22, and the king's entrance to the great marriage feast. [Please note that Neh. 8:10 also occurs in the setting of a great feast day, a glad festival on a holy day. One reason that we celebrate Maundy Thursday with a feast, a glad one at that, is that it adds a significant feast to Thanksgiving, Christmas and Fourth of July—a Christian occasion, situated in Passion Week and Easter.] The king finds a man not suitably dressed (he isn't wearing white, symbolizing righteousness—he is not attired to celebrate the occasion). His fashion declares that he is out of synch with the wedding invitation. “What are you doing in here?” collides with “Why are you flaunting yourself?” There is outrage, stemming from the inherent contempt, in both directions. *Friends, when we come into the presence of the Lord, we must make sure we come on his terms! We must “buy into” his purposes for the occasion.* This guest has done neither and he has no defense of his behavior. He is not apologetic and he didn't gather from those around him how he should have prepared for attendance! So, his trespassing feet are bound, and his transgressing hands are bound and he is cast out into the **outer darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth . . .** damned forever. There is a strong caution here who think they are entitled to dress as they wish wherever they are invited to go! Always honor the host, and the occasion above your preference for casualness and informality. It is neither a surprise party, nor is the celebration about you.

Delight in Jehovah is a strong refuge. Remembering the shift in focus, from self to Jehovah, we have a second qualification. Ours is a religion of gladness because we now learn that the “joy” of which I speak today is “Israel’s joy in her Lord” rather than God’s joy over Israel. We know God’s joy over his people through his protection of them. We also see the generosity of God in the direction to share with one another, to fellowship together, even to the exchanging of portions *so that everyone is included in the celebration and everyone is empowered to participate*. The highlight of Nehemiah’s feast was its inclusion, the open-handed distribution of meats and sweets. These features are illustrated in the account of Queen Esther (9:19 and 22). The occasion of Nehemiah’s feast is the recovery of the Law, “long forgotten and long neglected” as the rule of law for the commonwealth of Israel.

The people were seized by a communal sense of guilt, open conviction for law-breaking broke out spontaneously. That is why a feast day is declared. God knows and through his leaders expresses a concern for overwhelming guilt and shame. If our spirits flag we will grow discouraged and if this occurs defeat is waiting in the wings! So there is a word here for us, in the midst of seemingly interminable pandemic. The pandemic must cease first in our hearts. We must determine if our faith is firm, sure—unlike “doubtful ice”—is it durable enough to hold us up and see us through? And, if we find it sound enough, we must strap it on and skate.

We must stop with the lamentations, the fears and the sorrows. *They are crippling us!* We declare the pandemic over by **delighting in Jehovah**. That’s first and foremost. Look, we have three vaccines, we have an array of palliatives and of treatments. The lethality of the virus is much diminished and the fear of it would decline if we celebrated what we do have in terms of drugs, treatments and precautionary measures. We are informed now as to infection and contagion. The time for fear is over. We must stand against the extremism of vaccine mandates because there are other ways to manage one’s health, and other avenues for treatment of the virus and some of those alternatives are less risky than the one size must fit all pushed by the Pharmaceutical companies who are growing rich not merely by the pandemic, but by the monopoly of intervention signified by the vaccines. Government pressure to be vaccinated is, like it or not, driven by special interests, greed and a profit motive. Dependency on vaccines is a cover for dependency on the government. It is as if “In God we trust” is being replaced by “In Government we trust” and that reeks of self-salvation, very godless self-salvation. The question is just how drug dependent do we really want to be? And, this despondency renders us unfit for our work! It dislodges us from our purpose to serve God and others when it’s all about being safe and vaccinated. If you are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, start skating.

Skating requires finding your balance. For example, if we wish to skate we must marry our gladness to our gratitude. And we must sponsor a God-fixed joy. Yes, point to Creation, the stars in their places, the sun and the moon, providence and protection and sovereignty—divine love, forgiveness, mercy, salvation and reconciliation—the Gospel. Joy is a natural result of Christian faith. It is, shall we say, a strengthening duty! Joy strengthens just as despondency and doubt weaken us. It is commanded of us because we need to rise above our circumstances, happy, or unhappy! Of us it is written we are “sorrowful yet always rejoicing.”

The Gospel both brings to us (a calm, settled and deep gladness . . . some bright, good and joyful things such as a. acceptance with God, b. rest for our souls, and 3. communion/fellowship with Him) and takes from us the fear, the strifes within, the conflict of conscience, the inclinations, wills and passions which produce tumult, sorrows and disruptions as well as freedom from all accusations. The gospel works within us. It works joy within us because we are at

peace with God . . . every function of our human spirit has found safe harbor/haven and its object: *joy with health because faith in Him produces gladness in the believer*. Christianity is a religion of gladness.

Yes, gladness, but not in a trivial sense. Christian gladness is neither ignorant, nor oblivious! We know what we are, and we know what we ought to be and we know the anguish caused by the distance, or gap between the two. Jesus, before healing the poor dumb man, sighed and then said, “Be Opened.” He was even more acquainted with grief than we are. We have an anointing with the “oil of gladness,” by its hope, by fears removed, by union with God, by impacted fellowship, by reminders of sin and weakness, by our defiant, petulant and warring dispositions, by consequences (yes, punishments and exclusion), by a realistic sense of the world as it is . . . with all its woes. The oil and the thorns coexist for the Christian. *We know that sorrow lies on the surface, whereas joy is more central, more core—we observe that transitory circumstances are opposed to the perennial, essential joy*. We live out our joy in the midst of sorrows, joy is ever like spring flowers beneath the crush of winter’s cold.

This knowledge emboldens us to say things like, “Love is gladness . . . trust is gladness . . . obedience to Christ is our meat” . . . and that when we do His will we are the light of the world. There is a choice to be made: will you stand in the light, or will you stand in the darkness? Will we center on God and His love, Christ and His grace, the Holy Spirit and His communion . . . or on our failings, ourselves, our faults and sins? It makes all the world of a difference. The Gospel . . . or the Gloomies?! The nature of the Gospel, my relation to the gospel, it promises and precepts, its duties and predictions? I tint my world, I season it . . . May I not hamper my own well-being through a deficiency of fellowship! You know, slight, shallow and superficial? And may I never misconstrue my faith as “doubtful ice!” So may I be kept beyond doubting—which is the pathway to despair! ***Nothing but the joy, the delight in Jehovah, is my stronghold.*** Resolutions will fail me. My sense of sin will not prevail for me. No degree of contriteness will rescue me. Indeed a focus on these, sin, contrition and resolve, weakens me. Secure me in hope instead. . . strength relies on hope and for strength there must be joy. And I am made glad and strong if my faith and hope are fixed in Christ—He is my anchor, my hope and my salvation. In Christ alone! Remember, dear saints, you work by faith from a sense of pardon—never towards it. Yes, you live out of an acceptance of God, and not out of hope of attaining acceptance.

AMEN