

# Opening Our Hearts... with Joy

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The Community Church of Sebastopol  
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## **Isaiah 9:2-7**

Steve Hayner is the president of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and he only has a few months, if not weeks, to live. Early this year, around Easter he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and despite aggressive efforts to treat it, it has spread to his liver and other parts of his body. Both he and his wife, Sharol, have talked openly about this hard reality, about their ongoing faith and the many questions they have struggled with. As he has made the effort to balance medical intervention with ongoing quality of life, he has described the process as a “walk of faith and careful discernment” and says that he and his family – he has three adult children and several grandchildren – continue to gather to “weep together, to laugh and lament, and to pray.”

And Hayner has spoken directly to the many people who are praying for him and his family, saying “There is a much bigger story of which this is only a tiny part. And it is God’s story of love, hope, forgiveness, reconciliation and joy. We went into this journey choosing to trust God and to offer our fears to God. We’ve been so grateful for the freedom from fear and the abundance of peace that we have experienced. There are, of course, times of discouragement, grief, pain and wonder. After all, there are a lot of unknowns ahead of us...But life is about a lot more than physical health. It is more than medical tests and vital signs. More important is God’s overall presence with us, nourishing, equipping, transforming, empowering and sustaining us for whatever might be God’s call today. TODAY, my call might be to learn something new about rest. TODAY, my call might to encourage another person in some very tangible way. TODAY, my call might be to learn something new about patience, endurance and the identification with those who suffer. TODAY, my call might be to mull through a new insight about God’s truth or character.

I saw a bumper sticker yesterday that I loved: ‘More wagging; less barking!’ At that moment I was grumbling inside because it was so hard just to complete my short walk in the neighborhood. But almost immediately my perspective changed. Grumbling was changing nothing, but a fresh infusion of joy could color the world.”

That is a little more than I originally intended to share, but I was so deeply touched by Steve Hayner’s statement of deep and abiding faith, that I decided to share it with you. And perhaps what touches me most is his expression of joy. I once heard it said that it is breathtaking to watch people prepare to die as they lived. And that is exactly what Steve Hayner is doing. In his last, often difficult days, still expressing faith and joy in his life, his family, his God...joyful to the end.

In our text from Isaiah this morning, another one of those texts we hear almost every Advent and Christmas Eve, we hear the prophet speak of joy. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you.” But this not a joy that comes effortlessly. Interesting that it comes with the memory of the “boots of tramping warriors” and of “all the garments rolled in blood.” The people of Israel knew the oppression of foreign enemies, they knew fear, they knew the violence and destruction of war. Even as the prophet spoke these words in the 8th century BCE, the Assyrian army was poised for an invasion of Israel. This word is spoken, not to a world painted in pastels, but a world that knew dust and blood. The joy spoken of by the prophet is not a spiritual, otherworldly concept, but rather speaks of the mystery of a God present in a real world with all its agonies and ambiguities, struggles and triumphs. In the midst of all this...there is the promise of joy. For Steve Hayner, staring death in the eye, there still is joy.

But how to experience, to feel, such joy? So often I am so much more like Charlie Brown than Isaiah. When Linus comments that “Winter is on its way. The days are getting shorter,” Charlie Brown replies, “It’s a good thing. The way my days have been going lately, I’d just as soon have them not last too long.” Or when he tells Violet, “Gee, I get depressed easily. I don’t know what’s the matter with me. I just don’t know.” Grasping a small tree for support, he says,

“Sometimes I think my soul is full of weeds!” I know that feeling. And often such feelings are more intense this time of year. What where does this joy come from and how can I get some of it?

The story of Isak Dinesen, whose real name was Karen Blixson, was told in the Oscar-nominated film, “Out of Africa.” She was a prolific writer, an extraordinary woman who did not always choose wisely or live discreetly or really make much of a success of her life. But how she lived! And she wrote wonderfully of how she lived. She had that gift of being able to make every day count for something and in the midst of it all – the good and the bad - find joy.

After losing her devoted friend and leaving her husband and having to accept the bankruptcy of her farm in Africa, she found herself alone and in ill health. But from Africa she wrote these words, “You must not think that I am frightfully depressed and see everything in a tragic light. That is not at all the case. On the contrary, I think that these difficult times have helped me to understand better than before how infinitely rich and beautiful life is in every way and that so many things that one goes around worrying over are of no importance whatsoever.” She also once said, “God made the world round so we would never be able to see too far down the road.” Here was someone who, in spite of the often difficult, even tragic, circumstances of her life, still managed to find great joy.

We speak so much of happiness. I want to be happy; I want my children and grandchildren to find happiness. Happiness is a warm puppy! Nothing wrong with that. And yet, it seems to me that happiness is primarily an outward thing, a pleasing sensation – something we go after, grab hold of, seek out. And it can be so fleeting, so dependent on what is going on around me.

But joy, at least the joy I hear described by the prophet or see in the lives of people like Steve Hayner and Karen Blixson, is very different. We don’t grab it, it grabs us. It is something inward. It grows out of an attitude. It is not the circumstance; it is the embrace we make of our circumstance, the weather of one’s own soul.

I go fishing. My line gets tangled, my fly is caught in my ear, my casts go everywhere except where I want them to go. I can get very Charlie Brown. I’m never going to catch a fish! Why does all this happen to me? It gets so frustrating! But if I can just step back for a moment, appreciate the blue sky, the sound of the water, the beauty of being out in nature and not home working on a sermon, still being healthy enough to get out and do this, my self-pitying attitude changes, and I feel joy... I really do! Perhaps that’s what really opens the door to joy... appreciation: appreciating just everything, every day as an undiscovered adventure – as if we are seeing the sun for the very first time and the fresh earth and the persons whom we love and the problems that need solving and the tasks that need doing. Albert Einstein wrote, “The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stand at the cradle of true art and science, and is the beginning of all genuine religion. I like that. For who can ponder the wonders of earth, the majesty of the heavens, the mystery of love, the beauty of a young child, and not be gabbed by the marvel, yes, the joy of it all? I think of Steve Hayner, even in the late stages of cancer, wondering what surprises God might have in store for him today, looking at his grandchildren and speaking of joy... only joy.

And speaking of wonder and mystery, my mind goes to this Advent and Christmas season. It is a season that invites us to wonder at the mystery of this cosmic, creative power, steadfast love and irrepressible force for justice and reconciliation and peace, all embodied in the fragile flesh of a newborn child. God present in real life, subject to real life challenges, coming among us and sharing our common lot. Isaiah can speak of joy, even in a dark time, because he can see a great light – shining in the world and in our hearts. He sees the power of God working in and through us, shaping us, renewing us. It is as if the prophet is saying, “People, no matter what your circumstance, I want you to know that each of you is built from the loving use of God-given creativity, power and goodness. That goodness has taken up residence in each of your hearts” Knowing that, knowing we are the living image of God, knowing, in the words of Hayner, that God is at work nourishing, equipping, transforming, empowering and sustaining us, what other response can there be but joy.