

There's pain and joy
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
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The Rev. Katherine M. Bush

I was driving to church early on the quiet Sunday after Christmas when I heard the news that Archbishop Desmond Tutu had died. It's hard to explain why this news felt like such a hit to me. He spoke at my graduation from seminary, and I've taught readings from his reconciliation work for years. But I didn't really know him. By the time I got out of church, my social media feeds were full of quotations and stories of this great man, tributes for this man known as "Arch" to his friends. I'm not a friend of his - *the Dalai Lama is a friend of his*, so, again, why did I feel such a sense of loss? I clicked on one of the videos, and I heard it: his infectious laugh. It's hard to describe a laugh but his is a giggly, mischievous, contagious laugh. Google it after church; it will make you feel good. And the picture that I love the most, that I shared with my students when I taught the unit on forgiveness and reconciliation is of him dancing - with his buddy the Dalai Lama. Actually, I should say dancing *near* the Dalai Lama. It turns out the Dalai Lama does not dance, but the Archbishop does, and so he is dancing on stage around his friend, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism. While the Dalai Lama doesn't dance, he does laugh. And they laugh a lot, together.

These two men, each so well acquainted with sorrow, with injustice, with hatred, with pain are also quite familiar with laughter and with joy and with dancing. They co-wrote a book called The Book of Joy and if you watch them together (again, after church do some google searches), they tease and get tickled; they seem to be having so much blessed fun. Apartheid and exile shape the contours of their work and their lives and their ministries, and playfulness and delight and twinkling eyes shape the nature of their friendship and of each one's character.

Jesus will fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah and will be a man "despised and rejected by others, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." But surely that is not all. Others have wondered how the story might have been different if we had a scene in which Jesus laughed, what an infusion of Jesus giggling might have done to the narrative? It's hard to say, but it's not hard to believe that he did - he must have laughed and danced. He road-tripped with friends, he went to dinner parties, he told stories. A Christ who lived a *full* human life by definition recognized and seized moments of joy and celebration.

And his glory is first revealed in John's telling at a wedding, a multi-day event for the whole community where the wine is flowing, or at least, it was. Its absence is problematic not because you have to drink to have fun, but rather because its absence will be an embarrassment for the host family and a damper on an occasion that would otherwise lighten the whole village's season in an otherwise hardscrabble existence. Like Tutu and the Dalai Lama, Jesus and his family and friends and contemporaries know a life shaped by hardship and scarcity, and they also know that it's possible to dance and laugh in the midst of such a life ... And the first of his signs, his glory, is revealed in a revelation of joy.

Still, this balance is a challenge. At least it is for me. Knowing the broken systems and hurting world all too well, we shouldn't leave this story with a "let them eat cake" takeaway. The gallons of wine are not meant to numb us to realities we'd rather not face. The other day I was talking with a friend and our conversation drifted over how taxing it is just to keep up with a little morning news and her frustration and struggle to keep going at work when the needs seem endless, and we also laughed along the way and remarked at how lucky we are to have been friends for almost thirty years and while we were walking the sky turned the most extraordinary shades of pink and magenta and orange. Beauty and friendship and laughter even while it seems like the world is on fire. Wedding parties while the world needs redeeming. Tutu and the Dalai Lama giggling together when not musing about their own sufferings and the sufferings of their people.

When Christ promises that he comes to bring us life in abundance, that promise is not lopsided. He comes to open our eyes to the world and its deep need, to our neighbors and their pain, to the abundance of work that must be done for justice. And he comes to show us how to dance, how to look up and see the beauty of this amazing world, to remind us to gather with friends around a table and tell stories and laugh until we cry. There is an abundance of joy because there is an abundance of pain. There is an abundance of wine for the wedding guests, the feast will not dry up on his watch. And then he and his followers will continue their journey.

This is how it is. Preacher and writer Frederick Buechner says, "here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." When we recognize a chance to help it all be less terrible, let's reach out a hand. When we recognize the beauty of it all, let's raise a glass to the glory or join the dance.