

Editorial: I was going to write on joy, and then ...

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I was going to write on joy today, and then I woke up.

It's not a country song.

In a month when we're used to singing "Joy to the World," but at the end of a year when joy seemed—seems—always out of reach, I was going to force myself to write on joy today.

Over dinner last night, my wife, children and I tried our best to answer our Advent question of the day: "What is your definition of joy?"

I vaguely remember saying something like, "Joy is something not dependent on circumstances."

That was last night. This is today.

This morning, I woke up to technical issues that needed to be addressed right away. If you're anything like me, technical issues never are a source of joy.

But no matter. I was determined to write on joy, and write on joy I would. If the technical issues would just quit long enough for me to collect my thoughts ... about joy. If I could just unclench my jaw.

Really, though, how can a person even mention joy with all that's going on right now?

With all that's going on

A dear friend lost her brother in Fort Worth yesterday after a long fight with cancer and then COVID-19. We have published a lot of obituaries this year. Losing people we love is not a source of joy.

Every time we turn around, someone else is testing positive or exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19, and we worry. A dear friend's uncle in West Texas is fighting for his life against the virus. This is not a source of joy.

No, there has not been much joy in health and medicine this year, not even in the promise of historic vaccines. Nor has there been much joy in politics or race relations. Or the job market. Or education.

Instead of this year being a wellspring of joy, it's been more like a factory of fear, anger, worry and division. We're worn out.

Many pinned their hopes on 2021 and the return of joy in a new year that isn't 2020. But, alas, pesky reality keeps interfering. Millions will wait months to be vaccinated, and millions of jobs won't magically return on Jan. 1. With ongoing friction over the presidential election and race, we're not likely to build or mend trust between us by Jan. 1.

With all of this and more going on, we can't collect our thoughts ... about joy.

Even amid what's going on

Joy isn't dependent on circumstances? That's a mighty good thing. Otherwise, this year would have done more than snuff out the flickering flame of joy. This year would have crushed the whole candle and taken the rest of the Advent wreath with it.

That joy isn't dependent on circumstances means the flame of joy can alight anywhere, anytime. It means joy always is victorious.

But that's the pastor in me talking. That's the voice a cynic might say was paid to feed people that bologna every Sunday morning, a voice clearly out of touch with the real world.

It's also the voice of someone who spent time in hospital rooms with families who shared laughter amid scary and uncertain circumstances. It's the echoes of mourners who sounded much more like partygoers at their mother's, aunt's, cousin's funeral. I tell you, I've never seen—or heard—so much joy as I saw there.

And I wonder: Have we ever really known joy at Christmas? Or have we just mistaken happiness for it?

Finding joy where I wasn't looking

For the first time in more than 40 years of living, Christmas doesn't feel happy this year. Instead, it feels like an obligation, a day on the calendar we're going to acknowledge and get through no matter what. We've put up the decorations, we've lighted candles, we're singing the songs, and we're going to celebrate Christmas this year—we say through gritted teeth.

Where's the joy in that?

No, this Christmas season doesn't feel happy, and it makes me wonder if the "joy and wonder" of Christmas in years past was the actual "bologna." If the lights and tinsel, the trees and ornaments, packages and bows, stockings and toys, songs and well-wishes, cookies and Christmas movies—if we mistake for joy all those things that only make us feel happy.

Now that I'm thoroughly depressed, I've got to figure out what I'm going to write about joy today, because I have to write whatever I'm going to write,

and write it soon. The clock is ticking. If I could just collect my thoughts.

Maybe I'll set this aside for a little bit. Stand up and stretch. Step outside for a breath of fresh air.

I know, I'll spend some time praying for pastors. To say they are hard-pressed right now is to speak too mildly. This has been one of the hardest—if not the hardest—years of their ministries. Joy seems elusive for many of them; forget about happiness.

There's something about praying for pastors. As unlikely as it seems, there's joy there, dancing like a flame.

In what unlikely places might you find joy this year?

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