

Enjoy God? Really?
Genesis 2:1-3
I Peter 1:3-9

“In your presence there is fullness of joy....”

To ask as you did, “How can I enjoy God?” requires me to ask you a prior question: Enjoy which God? Do you want to know how to enjoy the God that vaguely exists out there or up there somewhere? If so, then there are best sellers for that, with spiritual exercises designed to put the two of you happily in touch. No need to get out of bed on a Sunday morning for those gods. But if you want to know how to enjoy the God who brought Israel out of Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead, we would do well to begin with the ancient characters who populate the pages of the Bible, trusting that the joy they knew in *that* God’s presence might lead us to do what we were born to do: to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Begin, then, with shepherds and with “the angel [who] said unto them, ‘Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people’” in Luke; and the sages who, when “they saw the star...rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him” in Matthew; and the disciples who in “their joy...were disbelieving and still wondering,” when Jesus appeared--like a ghost according to Luke—asking, “Have you anything to eat?” They “believed not for joy,” we read, in the presence of him who was dead and is alive. Like parentheses around the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, human beings are caught in the act of enjoying the presence of the living God who has unexpectedly come near.

So how did *they* enjoy God? Notice, in the first place, how the joy of the kings and the shepherds at the Christ’s birth and the disciples on the Emmaus road or at the beach with their risen Lord is a joy they did not conjure. They were, to say the least, utterly taken by surprise. What is it that happens to the human mind and heart and spirit when, not by design but in

disbelief, we are surprised by joy—when we are “pried wide open,” as it were, “in the direction of God’s unknown and obscure appearing?” Even though you have asked “How *can we...*?” these characters lead me to say that human beings *are not able of themselves to* enjoy God. Rather their gladness and rejoicing is to be found in the startling, frightening, redeeming movement of God toward them. God enters in, to comes alongside us, stops us in our tracks, arrests all our doing and turn us by grace to enjoy him. Mind you, I say this as one who has never had a palpable experience of God’s presence--no apparition from out of nowhere, no angelic visitation or vision on the road to anywhere—so what am I talking about?

Begin again with the ordinary details of your daily human existence. Most of our lives involve a hurried movement in time toward some goal or intention or plan or desire we have staked out. The longer we live, the more we race toward those things which, when acquired or achieved, we think will give us joy: a grade or graduation; a true love or a wedding ring; a profession and then a promotion; a salary and presently a raise; a child and another and suddenly they are grown and gone; retirement, infirmity and too soon the grave. Science now confirms that in our frenzy to find joy, even if we momentarily succeed, we almost immediately are returned to the frenzy unchanged. I think of the heart-breaking obituary I read on Thursday of a man who died suddenly in his sixties. The only detail his family saw fit to include in the fine print of the New York Times was the fact that he had increased the investment portfolio of the company for which he worked by so many millions of dollars. Oh, and he was survived by three children, eight grandchildren. The man died in the midst of the frenzy.

The joy that has to do with enjoying God, says Karl Barth, arrests all this harried movement for a moment in time. We stand still and look up. Is this not why God commands us to keep the Sabbath?: that we might on the first day of the week stop all of our doing, walk into some sanctuary and remember for an hour or even for an entire day that “the world has already

been created and will survive without [our] help,” writes Abraham Heschel. “Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul.” I think of Robert Jenson’s account of his morning at the cathedral of St. John the Divine when Dorothy Pappadokos was the organist. “While her French-style improvisations are shaking the stones of the building, and my stony heart,” he writes, “when climax upon climax each improbably eclipses its predecessor, I am able to sustain the notion that all God’s various holy ones are gathered there with us, that in fact we are praising [and enjoying] God... ‘with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven,’ that *if only we could see what is actually there*, we would see the mighty thrones and dominions and Mary and Paul and Olaf and my father-in-law and so forth around us in the cavernous spaces....” This is eternity planted in the soul on a Sabbath morning! Like the shepherds and sages, the disciples and the women, we are stopped in our tracks to glorify and praise, we bow down and thank the God who has come near. How can we enjoy God? Worship him!

But what I wonder, in the second place, is if there are intimations of enjoying God, of what we might call “sabbath joy,” available to us at any moment in time? “Every day,” Mary Oliver writes, “I see or I hear/something that more or less/kills me/with delight,/that leaves me/like a needle/in the haystack/of light./It is what I was born for--/to look, to listen,/to lose myself/inside this soft world--/to instruct myself/over and over/in joy,/and acclamation./Nor am I talking/about the exceptional,/the fearful, the dreadful,/the very extravagant--/but of the ordinary,/the common, the very drab,/the daily presentations....”

Again, think of the sages who returned home by another way and the shepherds who returned to their flocks and the disciples returning to their lives on the road to Emmaus. Enjoying God has something to do with the self-forgetfulness of arrested attention in everyday life that apparently, according to Jesus, also has something to do with faithfulness and with gratitude.

Marvel in the midst of nothing much at how you are alive: upheld and guided and sustained and governed by a hand not your own. Consider the lilies of the field, the birds of the air; maybe you will begin to see and touch and taste and smell and hear and treat the given world differently because, in some very ordinary everyday way, you are actually enjoying God. But also, lift up your eyes to the hills, now and again, especially when you are in extremis, and ask, "From whence does my help come?" Then watch as help arrives—unexpectedly and from the most surprising direction—to relieve you of the burden of believing it all depends on you. Enjoy the God on whom you depend in the ordinary,/the common, the very drab,/the daily presentations and be grateful.

In the third place, enjoying God must be more than a brief lifting of our individual hearts. It is, in a word, a social matter. "There may be cases," says Barth again, "when a [person] may [enjoy God] in isolation. But these are exceptional and dangerous...For all can be robbed of joy by the fact that even in company, in apparent fellowship...each wills to have only his own, her own joy. In this case," he concludes, "we should not be surprised if...there can be no real joy but only its spectre."

Back to our characters: once the shepherds had seen Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger, they made known what had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed. Once the wise men saw the child with Mary his mother and opened their treasures, they departed for their own country by another road, lest the news they had to tell be silenced by Herod's sword. Once the disciples believed not for joy that Jesus was alive, they began to turn the world upside-down.

We can enjoy God only as we are sent out to tend a world more in need of rejoicing than it knows or believes. Yet there is the rub. For when we step out of ourselves and into the world, what we find is a world busily taken with its own activity and not readily arrested from its

movement...a world content in the words it speaks to itself and not particularly attuned to an address from outside itself which would turn the world Godward. Therefore enjoying God in the world requires of us a bit of imagination. "...it is not enough simply to give [the world] a share in what gives joy to us. Nor is it really enough merely to think and do something which we know might be an occasion of joy to some....What is really demanded is that I ask myself from the standpoint of the other what will give [the other] joy"; and from the standpoint of the other the answer looks something like clothing the naked, taking in the homeless, visiting the prisoner, releasing the captive, actions that also surprisingly have to do with everlasting joy, with enjoying God forever.

Though finally your question returns me to the first Sabbath and to an astonishing little detail. On the seventh day of creation, God decided to stop creating and to "enter into *this* relationship with *this* [creation]" saying, "This is it and this is good!" This little detail means we are not dealing with some self-perpetuating process, some never ending cycle, some infinite, ongoing motion, dealing with a being never ceasing, never finding time for any creature, never satisfied, always making other beings, never loving a one of them. Rather for reasons that frankly escape me, this little detail means that God chose, from the beginning, to love and enjoy precisely us!

"No slightest hint was ever vouchsafed to me that there had ever been or ever would be any connection between God and Joy," wrote C.S. Lewis of his conversion. "If anything, it was the reverse. I had hoped the heart of reality might be of such a kind that we can best symbolize it by a place; instead I found it to be a Person."

"Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with indescribable and glorious joy." How can we enjoy God? Rejoice with exceeding great joy and abject humility on this Thursday next: that in the

Person of Jesus Christ, God has chosen before the foundation of the world to enjoy the whole human running race forever—to enjoy you! Each of us ought to do our best to return the favor, to rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy. Thanks be to God! Amen.