

We can trust in surprises

By [Guy Sayles](#)

December 22, 2015

I enjoy Christmas—always have. I look forward to children’s pageants, complete with Burger King crowns for wise men, bath-robed shepherds, and aluminum foil-wings for angels; misty-eyed singing of “Silent Night” in the glow of candlelight; watching George C. Scott as Ebenezer Scrooge and Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, the Grinch’s stealing and returning Christmas yet again. I look forward to the arrhythmic ringing of Salvation Army bells.

The closer we get to the celebration of Christmas—to a fresh celebration of the ways God keeps being born among us in Jesus-like ways—the closer we also come to the possibility of joy. Welcoming that possibility has been one of our Advent challenges.

How much room do we have for exuberant happiness, unrestrained celebration, and extravagant wonder?

Sometimes, joy gets crowded out by our often unconscious assumptions that skepticism is a surer mark of intelligence than is faith and that suspicion is more authentic than affirmation.

At least since Descartes, doubt has been more satisfying to the Western mind than has trust. I don’t want to surrender any ground we’ve gained by the exercise of rigorous reason; after all, it has helped to expose folly, sham, and superstition. Critical reason and sound logic are companions, not adversaries, of genuine faith.

I’m not interested in blind belief or deaf assent, not at all, but perpetual deconstruction leaves us bereft of enchantment, transcendence, and mystery. Carlyle Marney used to say that the mind is like an attic window: stuck open is as bad as stuck shut. What do we affirm, trust, and believe?

Joy sometimes gets shoved aside by our privileging of pain. Like many others, I’ve found a great deal of necessary catharsis in the idea that we can be vulnerably honest with one another and with God about our wounds. I’ve been helped by the long-familiar notion of Henri Nouwen’s that we are all “wounded healers.” None of us

gets out of life without injury and damage, and it's from that pain that God often gives us the gifts of transformation, renewal, and compassion. It's not that God causes or intends the pain. Rather God loves us too much to waste it and will work with us to bring meaning and hope out of it.

During my early years of ministry, it was risky to speak of wounds; there was an unstated but real pressure to pretend wholeness. Over the last couple of decades, I've observed a different danger: that we will so focus on woundedness that we have no capacity to celebrate healing when it comes. We might even conclude that pain and struggle are more vividly real than grace and mercy. I don't want to deny difficulty, despair, and death—my experience with cancer has made that kind of denial impossible—but neither do I want to deny happiness, hope, and life.

Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this season, came not just to be with us but to deliver us. He came not just to be wounded for us and with us but to unleash resurrection energy into the world. Is there room in us for celebration, laughter, and joy which he makes possible?

Stanley Hauerwas says that “joy is the disposition that comes from our realization that we can trust in surprises to sustain our lives.” God shows up in places as unlikely as Bethlehem and Calvary, as unexpected as our weary cynicism, and as unanticipated as suffering. We can count on surprises like Christmas. No wonder the angel said: “Behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all people.”

*Originally posted at [From the Intersection](#)*