

The Longing for Permanent Joy

Readings

Isa 65:17-25

Ps 126

1 Thess 5:12-28

John 3:22-30

Opening

When I get homesick, I turn to the poet Anne Porter. Mind you, I now live a mere 3 miles from my childhood home now. My homesickness is not a backward nostalgia, but a forward nostalgia—I'm homesick for our future home.

Anne Porter voices that same longing in a poem entitled "Music." She writes of a memory when she sat on the floor as a child, listening to her mother play piano. She began sobbing but had no words to explain her tears:

The Longing for Permanent Joy

Why is it that music
At its most beautiful
Opens a wound in us
An ache a desolation
Deep as a homesickness
For some far-off
And half-forgotten country

Music brings a mystery, echoing eternal beauty we have only begun to hear. In transcendent melodies, she muses:

We dimly remember the fields
Their fragrant windswept clover
The birdsongs in the orchards
The wild white violets in the moss
By the transparent streams

And shining at the heart of it
Is the longed-for beauty
Of the One who waits for us
Who will always wait for us
In those radiant meadows

Yet also came to live with us
And wanders where we wander. ¹

Yes, I am longing for home, for that far country whose advent cannot come soon enough. And on the third Sunday of Advent—Gaudete Sunday—mother Church says to us, “Go on, let your joy run free. Look at our eternal hope with a wide lens; look closely, look deeply, look in here to the world which is coming, the home for which you were made.” /

¹Anne Porter, *Living Things: Collected Poems*, “Music,” 54.

The new heaven and new earth is not, as I heard someone recently say, an endless tropical vacation. Heaven will not be finding your greatest fulfillment in the Cayman Islands; heaven will be seeing face to face the firstborn of creation, the firstborn of the dead, the One who holds all things together and makes all things new—Jesus Christ our Lord.

Isaiah looked into the future and perceived a glimpse of God's glory in the new creation of heaven and earth. He did not see all that John witnessed in his vision revealed in the Book of Revelation. Whatever we have gleaned or glimpsed from Scripture, from prophets like Isaiah, John the Baptist, or John the Revelator, we still believe there is more to this great mystery. These visions are given for our comfort and encouragement, but we see this vision through a glass darkly. "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love them."²

So today is a day to re-enchant our imagination with visions of hope and joy from Scripture. Did you know that, too, is an act of repentance? Repentance is not only confessing and turning from our sins. Repentance involves joy and wonder. The word repentance means "to change your mind." Repentance means turning toward God's wonder with greater intention. Devoting your attention and your affections to God's new heavens and new earth is an act of *joyful* repentance.

No More Corruption

So turn with me, my brother and sister, to a vision of permanent, eternal things. Look with me for these few moments upon scenes from the prophet that share a common feature—the end of sadness. Isaiah has an affection for this phrase, "no more," in his vision. No more will men and women die suddenly and unprepared. No more will a child die for lack of strength; no more will children be unwanted.

Outside my window, I hear sirens at all hours of the day and night, rushing to emergencies and distresses of my neighbors, crises and injuries and abuses that resound the curse upon Adam's sons and daughters. But sirens will blare no more in the new Jerusalem.

²1 Corinthians 2.9

No more will a man need stand at the end of an exit ramp for want of food or work. No more will one find their work drudgery. No more will a widow bear in her soul a grief too deep for words. No more will a lonely soul weep in isolation. The day advances on us even now when the Lord of all creation will return and announce over his world, “No more!”

We have grown old bearing these burdens, these memories, these traumas. Behold a mystery my weary sister, my exhausted brother: “When God creates new heavens and a new earth, *the former things shall not be remembered, nor come into mind*. No more will the brain trigger memories of pain and suffering. We will exchange our haunted memories for a new mind. If the resurrection is true, our very brains will be transfigured when we receive an incorruptible body. Our thoughts will trigger the grace, love, and beauty of the Lord, not fear, not anxiety, not sadness.

The End of Fleeting Joys

We know suffering like a fish knows water. We swim in oceans of pain, whether our own or that which we witness in our world, and we cannot imagine life without travail and struggle. Yet hear this my brother and sister, the glory of God’s new creation is not only the *absence* of pain, as if the eternal City is known and loved for what she *lacks*. Here is the where our vision of eternity could quite diminished.

The prophets stir our longing for God’s new creation not only by what is absent, but even more by **what is gloriously present**. I summon another prophet, Zechariah, for a vision of what is present in God’s eternal city: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”³ “Behold,” the Lord proclaims through Isaiah, “I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.”

For this we were created—to be permanently glad. Our petty pleasures cannot compare with the weight of glory that awaits. That’s one good reason we need Advent to join

³Zechariah 8.4-5, ESV

repentance and joy together. C.S. Lewis suggested that one of our greatest flaws as human beings is settling for petty pleasures:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. ⁴

Even when we cast aside our petty pleasures for higher loves, still we have only had a foretaste of joy in this life. We sense that we were made for deeper, unending loves within our souls.

Every created thing in this world suggests we were made for **permanent joy**. Anthony Esolen said, “What we love we want to endure.”⁵ That is why he says a family gathered around the hearth makes us reminisce of Eden. Or why the inner calm we feel standing beside a stream makes us think of unending peace. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins cried out for permanent peace to the Holy Spirit in verse, “That piecemeal peace is poor peace. What pure peace allows/ Alarms of wars, the daunting wars, the death of it?”⁶ Well, we weren’t made for piecemeal peace, but pure, unending peace. I hear the echo of unending peace in gentle streams; I see it in quiet meadows where wildflowers praise their Maker.

And so this is the joy of the new Jerusalem: we will fall in love with the wonderful order of God’s new creation. We will see his natural world made new in glorious harmony. Creation will not war with one another. Lions will not look at cows and think ‘here’s lunch.’ Isaiah suggests even gastronomic change for the king of the jungle. Wolves will not consume

⁴C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 26.

⁵Anthony Esolen, *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homesick World*,

⁶Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Peace”

sheep. Creation will no longer suffer corruption and disorder. She will be marvelously ordered as God intended. *Creation will be harmonious and her harmony will be her glory.*

A Long, Permanent Joy

In that new creation there will only be harmony because of one fact: in Jesus Christ all things hold together. There will be no more idols, no more false gods in the New Jerusalem. All of our idols that held us in captivity will be destroyed. Not only will creation find its marvelous order and harmony, our redeemed souls will find its order and harmony.

When our last battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil is ended, we will be transfigured in the likeness of Christ and the triune God will be our supreme love. No more worship of created things instead of the Creator. We will not suffer from disordered loves placing things above persons, placing family members above our Savior and Redeemer. No, he will make us new for that new creation. That which we could not achieve through even our most faithful repentance, discipline, and asceticism, our Lord Jesus will give to us by grace: a body and soul that worships the Lord with perfect worship. Our bodies will no longer hold our souls captive; rather, our souls will govern our bodies so that we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. The intimacy that we have so craved with our Lord and Redeemer will no longer be intimacy by faith, but intimacy face-to-face. We will say with fullness of heart that which John the Baptist expressed long ago: “this joy of mine is now complete.” The communion we enjoy will be so intimate that before we call to our Lord, he will answer our heart’s request. /

There will be work to do in the Lord’s new creation, my brother and sister. But work will not become an addiction, nor will it be a source of physical, mental, or spiritual exhaustion. There will be no more *toil*, only the joy of fulfilling work in the Kingdom of God. The saints of God will “long enjoy the work of their hands.” Find a good handcraft in this life that you want to perfect in the New Jerusalem—woodworking, calligraphy, baking, ceramics, whittling, sketching, painting, sewing, knitting, and of course, gardening. Put your hand to materials that God made with his very own hands. Find that handcraft that gives you joy and makes you lose a sense of time, for that is a foretaste of work in the New Jerusalem.

My son and I are converting our garage into a sort of makeshift woodshop. I am a beginning woodworker myself. Yesterday Colin and I spent most of the afternoon in the woodshop. He drilled pocket holes for the first time into 1x3 boards yesterday. It won't take long before he surpasses my skill level. The hours seemed to pass like minutes as we worked together. When I stepped into the garage this morning, I smelled the remaining sawdust and the scent gave me joy *and* made me homesick for our future home.

We will work and worship and play in a transfigured universe, all for the glory of God. We will be home with the One in whom all things were created, all things redeemed, in whom all things hold together, both now and forever.

Jerusalem, Our Mother

There are two ways of responding to homesickness: one is to allow the ache to become sadness; the other is to allow joy and expectation to increase. I advise the latter. Mother Church says to us today, "Go on, let your joy run free today. And let it grow in days to come." St Paul said much the same to the Galatians: "the Jerusalem above is free, and *she is our mother.*"⁷ But there is only one reason that city is our home and destiny; only one reason that city is eternal, beautiful, and glorious; in that city there is no temple, but the very presence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who makes our joy complete. Amen.

⁷Galatians 4.26