

"Surprised by Joy – impatient as the wind."

Please tell me I'm not the only one who's "always meant" to read (or maybe watch) something important, but needs a deadline to do it?

That pink candle got me to finally read the classic book Surprised by Joy by C.S. Lewis. I don't know why I've never gotten around to it before. I've read and enjoyed plenty of other C. S. Lewis books. Year after year leading up to the pink candle, I've regretted not having read it the previous year.

Well, no more regrets (at least about that). I'm glad I finally read it this year, but you know what? Compared to some of his other works – The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe and all the Chronicle of Narnia books, or The Screwtape Letters, all loaded with moments of wit and whimsy -- I found this book about Joy to be, well, a little dour.

And I guess that's fitting. It's the intellectual and spiritual memoir of Lewis' early life as he converts to Christianity as a young adult. We know what life is not filled with unbridled Joy every minute of every day. C. S. Lewis refers to "stabs of Joy" (and he capitalizes the word Joy). Now that's a vivid phrase, isn't it? "Stabs of Joy." Allow me to wimp out and suggest the term "pings of Joy" instead. To describe those things that come at us when we least expect or are not looking for them. Those things that draw us out of ourselves into something bigger, something better, something *beyond*.

Joy – capitalized even when it's not the beginning of a sentence, Is important, valuable, essential. But in this life it's not an end in itself. C. S. Lewis says it's a yearning, a longing; a "pointer to something other and outer."

The book Surprised by Joy tells the arc of his story from atheist to deist (with lots of stops along the way) to ultimately accepting the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, becoming "nearer to God . . . in a new way."

That title “Surprised by Joy” comes from a poem by William Wordsworth.
 “Surprised by joy – impatient as the wind.”

The poet describes getting swept up into unexpected joy.
 But just a couple of lines later, he comes back down to earth,
 remembering that the one with whom he longs to share his joy isn’t there.

Wordsworth published this poem three years after the death
 of his young daughter, Catherine.
 No doubt, surprised both that he could still feel joy, and that she wasn’t there to enjoy it.

If you ever wondered why there are three deep purple candles on the Advent wreath,
 but only one light pink candle, that may be your answer.
 Stabs. Pings. Surprises of Joy.

As a little child in Baptist Sunday School, I grew up memorizing and even singing the lines
 of today’s reading from our namesake Paul’s Letter to the Philippians.
 “Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I say rejoice.”

I wish along the way, sooner, that someone had pointed out to me that Paul
 was not at a garden party when he wrote those words. Do you know where he was?
 In jail. Not long to be martyred for the faith he so joyfully commends.

I don’t know if Paul himself was “surprised by Joy,” but I’m surprised *by* his Joy.
 How could he write those words?
 It’s there in what comes after this call to rejoice whatever one’s circumstances.
 “The Lord is near,” writes Paul. “Do not worry about anything, but in everything
 by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

Then comes that Canticle, from the prophet Isaiah, telling us to draw water
 with rejoicing, from the deep springs of salvation.
 He says to “ring out . . . [with] joy.”
 Isaiah wasn’t at a garden party either, but most likely in exile,
 writing to and for people who’d lost everything.
 Calling them to trust in God to save them.
 To feel those stabs, those pings, of Joy even in the midst of dislocation and despair.

Today is the second of the two middle Sundays of Advent when we hear from
 John the Baptist.

You might think that calling folks a “brood of vipers” and threatening an axe to cut down trees that don’t bear fruit of repentance, isn't much of a call to Joy. Maybe I’m mixing metaphors here, but what if that figurative axe of John the Baptist clears the way to feel a “stab of Joy”?

Repenting of our sins, turning away from everything that draws us from the love of God, seeking forgiveness, making amends -- that's where true joy is to be found.

And so, we light the lone pink candle the same day we hear from John the Baptist, one week closer to Christmas.

Whatever’s happening in your life, whatever burdens you bear, at the end of another year in a prolonged and once again raging pandemic, and all the hidden and not-so-hidden costs that accompany it, in a country divided and in turmoil, even with all that, I pray that we may all be surprised by Joy (with a capital J) this Christmas.

God knows we need it. C.S. Lewis realizes this too.

Not in this book, but in another one written just before his death, Lewis writes of Joy not only as a momentary “stab” of the eternal into this life, but our ultimate destination in the life-to-come.

To a friend he calls Malcolm, C.S. Lewis writes:

“...While we are in this valley of tears, cursed with labour [and] doomed to perpetual ...anxieties, certain qualities that must belong to the celestial condition have no chance to get through...except in activities which for us here and now are frivolous... It is only in our moments of permitted festivity that we find an analogy. Dance and game are frivolous down here; for ‘down here’ is not their natural place. They are a moment’s rest...in this world where everything is upside down. But in a better country [they are] the Ends of ends. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”*

Joy is the serious business of Heaven.

Ping!

*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer by C.S. Lewis (pages 92-3, adapted)