

Parade of joy

By [Guy Sayles](#)

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Years ago, I preached a sermon I still regret: a rambling, ill-focused, and sneering screed of a Palm Sunday sermon in which I took cheap potshots at parades. I talked about out-of-tune bands, out-of-sync drill teams, and out-of-shape military veterans crammed into their old uniforms. I critiqued floats hastily constructed on the back of flatbed trucks or pulled by loud, smoke-belching tractors. It was a perfectly awful sermon.

Part of what made the sermon so dreadful was how clever and sophisticated I thought I was. I even tried, lamely and unsuccessfully, to claim, that my curmudgeonly cynicism was a spiritual gift. Almost as soon as the worship service was over, however, there flashed across my mind what had happened to Peter the night Jesus was arrested and he denied any connection with Jesus. After the third denial, Peter heard a rooster crow, and it woke him up to the terrible thing he had done. After I preached my sermon in praise of cynicism, I heard a rooster crow; I had denied something essential about the gospel. I had denied joy, and, like Peter, I wept bitterly about how misguided I could be. I still do that sometimes; I cry over how easy it is to miss the joy God intends for us.

For a variety of reasons, some stretching back to my very early years, joy has been a struggle for me. Theologian David Ford diagnosed my spiritual condition perfectly when he wrote: "Joy may be a greater scandal than evil, suffering, or death. Some people have a realism that can come to terms with the darker side but cannot cope with something that seems too good to be true" (*The Shape of Living*, 179).

Over the last year, because of some difficult challenges I have faced, I have come to know, firsthand, the unfailingly gentle presence of Jesus in harsh circumstances, been surprised by laughter in the midst of tears, and felt life rise up from weakness. These experiences have called me to turn, more decisively than ever before, from my practiced pessimism, cultivated cynicism, and familiar melancholy.

I am more convinced than ever before that Jesus is in us and with us—anywhere and everywhere, anytime and all the time. For that reason, joy is always as near to us as our own breath. Again, in the words of David Ford: “God does not coerce us with joy but there is always more on offer than we can take.”

Parade, anyone?

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