

Santosham

Alida Ward Jan. 15 2018

Last week, at exactly this moment,
I and the wonderful group of Greenfield Hillers who traveled with me to India were landing at JFK --
making our arrival at Terminal 4 just hours after all those post-storm scenes of mayhem you saw,
and just hours before the water pipe burst in the baggage area.
We slipped through, blissfully oblivious to what had happened or what was about to happen --
a happy ending to what had been a wonderfully happy trip.

In a few weeks, later in February, you'll get the chance to hear from the people you sent to India from this church --
the teens and adults whom you surrounded with prayer
and whose pictures you've already seen all over Facebook.
But today, I get to share a little.
And if I'd put a title to this sermon in your bulletin, the title I would have put is *Santosham*.
Santosham.
I already told you that this was a wonderfully happy trip.
and Santosham is a wonderfully happy word.
It means, simply, JOY. Happiness.

I don't know much Telugu, which is the language spoken by the folks we visit,
but Santosham – that word I know, because we hear it all the time.
When schoolkids surround us, excitedly telling us how glad they are we're there,

Santosham is what we hear from them.

When the pastors we support tell us why they love the work they do, the hard work of ministering in the rural villages of India, Santosham is the word that keeps popping up.

When the woman who runs a center for the impoverished elderly talks to us about her passion for the work she does, Santosham is the word she uses.

And among the nurses in the hospital we support, and the women in the training centers that we are empowering. Santosham, santosham. Happiness. JOY.

What we experience when we go to India,
something a group of us from here do every year,
what we experience is Santosham.

Joy.

So let me tell you a little about that Joy.

Let me share with you just a few glimpses of that joy -- and then I'll tell you why I think it has everything to teach us about who we're called to be as Christ-followers.

I was asked to do a baptism this year,
something I've been privileged to do from time to time on these trips.
In the little village of Jamalapuram,
people had gathered from dozens of villages to worship together on New Year's Day,
a day which the Christian community there celebrates with great thanksgiving.

The church we'd gathered at was too small to hold all the worshipers, so we were outside, kids and adults sitting cross-legged on the ground for the

three-hour service of song and dance and scripture and the American lady preaching.

And after worship, it was time for baptisms.

So a little group of us went to the back of the church, to the baptism pool. There's none of this dribbling a little water on the forehead there -- in fact, when I once told someone there that that's what we do, they asked if Connecticut had a water shortage -- that was the only explanation they could imagine.

In India, for a baptism, you are all in. Full immersion.

There were two women who had come to be baptized, who nervously, quietly, answered the question put to them by the pastor:

Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your only Lord and Savior?

Are you ready to be baptized into the faith of Jesus Christ?

Yes, they said.

And as the crowd burst into a chorus of Hallelujah Stuthi Mahima – give God praise and glory – I climbed into the baptism tank.

I understand that they make special water repellent pastors' robes for full immersion baptisms, but that's not a thing in rural India. I just got wet.

And into the tank with me climbed the first of the women to be baptized. It was immediately clear to me that she hadn't realized she was going to have to go under -- and she really didn't want to.

I felt bad about forcing anything, so I just kind of dipped her back and hoped that was good enough.

I could tell by the looks around me that it wasn't good enough.

So, take two.

She held her nose and closed her eyes tight, and I wrapped her in a hug and down we went.

And as we emerged from the water, well-soaked, both of us, the pastor proclaimed that she was a new creation in Christ.

And the look on her face was sheer, unadulterated joy. Santoshum.

Mary was her new name,
and Mary's face was shining.
It's a big, big deal to be baptized,
it's a big, big deal to set aside what and who you have been and to choose
to be part of a minority religion –
it is a big deal to say “here is where I have found love. Here I know
grace.”
And Mary's face was alive with that grace and that hope and that joy.
Santosham.

That's one snapshot.
Here's another.
We are in a mango grove near the village of Gollapudi.
It's not mango season; I only know they're mango trees because a child
has told me,
one of the hundred children who is with us.
We have taken all the girls and boys in our children's hostels
on a field trip,
The kids who live in these hostels are there because home is not possible
for them right now –
they may have no parents, or only one,
or if they have family, their family can't afford to feed them.
So they are with us, in a home in Gollapudi.
And we have decided to have a day of just sheer fun.
And leading us all is one of the most energetic people I have ever met,
Jothy Kumar. Jothy and his wife and two year old boy live in the hostel.
and they love every child there like their own.
Praise the Lord! he says, to call us all to attention,
and Hallelujah!
and then he announces that it's time for musical chairs.

From the back of a truck,
someone produces the plastic chairs that are ubiquitous in India,
and within minutes,
our Greenfield Hill teenagers and a whole bunch of Indian kids are
running around and around in circles,
waiting for the moment the music played from Joythi's phone stops,
and they fling themselves into the chairs.
Most of our teenagers have never played musical chairs,
and they are gasping and giggling as they scramble to get a chair,
and the Indian kids can't stop laughing, either,
and over it all I hear a laugh that won't stop, and it is Joythi,
his toddler wrapped around his leg,
a grin across his face as he watches kids from opposite sides of the world
find sheer delight in each other.
Absolute joy on his face. Santosham.
Absolute joy on every face there. Santosham.
The lively, loving, joyful spirit of God everywhere I look.

What we witness in India,
what we ourselves experience, is something much much more than
happiness.
In the love we see,
in the faith we sing,
on the faces of those who are doing God's work in the toughest of places,
what we experience is Joy,
soul deep, spirit sustaining Joy.
Santosham.

It is the same joy I have seen on the face of a grandmother in Appalachia,
sitting on her porch and singing old gospel songs,

the same joy on the face of the Fairfield dad up fixing that grandma's roof and living his faith.

It's joy that I've seen on the faces of people sitting right here in these pews, in those moments when we feel God's presence in this place.

The joy I'm talking about is the joy our scriptures today spoke of. An inexpressible and glorious joy, the scripture said. A complete joy, a soul-rejoicing joy.

This joy is something much more constant than just happiness, far deeper and more profound than simply cheerfulness.

Years and years ago,
I was leading worship in a nursing home here in town.
And the scripture I had shared was one that we just read –
rejoice in the Lord always.
And I suddenly felt like an idiot for using that scripture;
I was in the presence of folks who were dealing with loneliness and frailty beyond what I could imagine. Who was I to tell them to be joyful?
But then an elderly woman in a wheelchair raised her hand to speak.
I know what that joy is, she said.
It's assurance. Assurance that I am loved. Assurance that I am never alone.
I know that joy, she said.

That's it.

Joy, true joy, the joy I'm talking about, is like an underground spring supplying your soul with the assurance that you are loved, profoundly loved. Always. Forever.

And how do you get that joy?

How do you make yourself a joy-filled person?

The answer is that you stop trying to get, stop trying to make, and just start accepting what's right in front of you.

Joy is a gift; the assurance of being loved is a gift; and it is given to us in Jesus Christ.

Christ, whose birth we have just rejoiced in, is God's own word to us: you are loved, and I am with you.

And to acknowledge this as truth is to open ourselves to joy.

On that New Year's Day in Jamalapuram, before Mary and I dunked ourselves in the baptism pool, there was something else that caught at my heart.

My friend John Mark, who is our partner in mission, the leader of our work there, John Mark had stepped up to the microphone unexpectedly. I had been worrying about him since we'd come to India; because his wife, a cherished part of the ministry, had departed this life unexpectedly just a few months earlier, and I worried for John Mark, grieving in this season of celebration.

John Mark paused at the mic for a moment, and then began to speak, softly at first, then with growing intensity and passion.

In Telugu, of course.

We didn't know what he was saying, but we could see the effect of his words; people leaned forward to listen, they nodded, they smiled.

We didn't know what he was saying, but we knew he was preaching with passion, from some place deep in his heart.

Finally John Mark stopped, remembering suddenly that there were a lot of us behind him without a clue about what he'd been saying.
He turned to us with a smile.

“I was talking to the people about ‘Happy New Year’,” he explained.
“We say it to everyone, ‘Happy New Year, happy New Year!’
But where does happiness come from?
How can we have joy even when there is sadness?
How can we have santosham?”
And he paused.
“Because,” he said, “because Christ gave everything for us.”
And we are loved by him. And that is our joy.
So it is,” he said, “it *is* a happy new year.”

And sitting there in the hot Indian sun,
surrounded by people who had traveled miles on foot to worship Christ
together,
listening to this man speak joy from the depth of his being,
I was overwhelmed by the power of this faith of ours.
To bring hope into every darkness,
to show the way forward to the grieving,

to light up every shadowy place,
to transform hearts,
to give joy.
Santosham.

In this new year, as I bring to you the blessings of your sisters and brothers
on the other side of the world,

I also bring their wish for you:
that you may know joy --
that joy that sustains our souls;
that joy that is ours to possess,
that joy that comes from the one who loves us more than we can imagine.
Santosham.
Amen.