

Filled with Joy

How many of you would say you are filled with joy this morning? As we heard from Judy earlier, the Third Sunday of Advent is different from all the others. The color of the candle is pink rather than purple. As we know, Advent is considered in part a season of penitence, and purple is the color of penitence. Whereas pink is the color of joy. The Third Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of Joy. The joy of Christmas, right? Of Immanuel, God with Us, coming to earth as the baby Jesus. [Sing: “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.”] Except, it’s not Christmas yet. That’s still twelve days away. Jesus has not yet been born. So why joy? Why today? And most importantly, what is joy? Let’s see what today’s lections might teach us about joy.

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,” the prophet Isaiah begins in chapter 61, “because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news.” Hooray! Certainly sounds joyful! Happy, celebratory! Except are joy and happiness the same thing? Because let’s be clear: the prophet Isaiah wasn’t always happy. No prophet was. Theirs wasn’t a happy calling. God anointed them (to use Isaiah’s term) to bring news that often wasn’t “good” or happy. As a matter of fact, the prophets, including Isaiah, were often despised by their fellow Israelites.

Even so, Isaiah believed that the spirit of the Lord God was upon him. In the next verse, he even uses God’s personal name, Yahweh. (Anytime the word LORD is all in caps, as it is in verse 2, that’s a stand-in for the name Yahweh.) As if to say, this is a God we know—or at least can know. This God isn’t “somewhere out there,” strange, beyond us. This God—whose name we know—is right here, familiar, with us. Or we could say, is near us.

You might not be feeling happy this Christmas season. The news we hear or have to share might not be good news. I think, for example, of Julie Anderson, who is continually awaiting the next news about the progress of her cancer, news that often isn’t happy, or good. And I think of Bonnie Funk, who just received a very unwelcome diagnosis of skin cancer. But one thing Julie and Bonnie and we can always count on, even when the news is bad, is the nearness of God. Is that, perhaps, part of the meaning of joy?

Isaiah tells us that he was sent in part to “comfort all who mourn.” To “provide” for them, “to give them a garland instead of ashes.” Who do we know today that is mourning? John and Lois and I talked to our cousin Suzy just a couple of days ago (the one who just lost her husband Morris to Covid). She has gone to stay temporarily in Kansas City with her daughter Beth (who of course just lost her father). Suzy told us she isn’t ready yet to be alone in her own house in Wichita, and that she and Beth have been crying together a lot. They are a comfort to one another. Is comfort when we are grieving part of the meaning of joy?

The prophet predicts a time when the people of Israel shall rebuild some ancient ruins, what he calls “the devastations of many generations.” His people had indeed experienced significant devastation, when their beloved city and temple were destroyed and they were taken into captivity by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. But Isaiah tells them that this devastation won’t last forever. And then the writer of Psalm 126 begins his psalm with the words “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion . . . our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” Is restoration part of the meaning of joy? In what ways have you experienced or are you experiencing restoration this season? What in your life has been recently rebuilt, or is being rebuilt? A house? A relationship? Your health? A sense of meaning and purpose? Your confidence? Your faith?

The psalmist helped his people remember that “when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.” And in verse 3 the psalmist says it again: “The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.” What great things has the Lord done for you? What blessings can you see in hindsight? What “20/20 vision” helps you to remember the good things that were part of the year 2020, a year that in so many ways was filled with bad things? Is remembering the good things part of what it means to be “joyful” or to “rejoice?” Is remembering, in general, part of the meaning of joy? At the graveside service of Alvena Bartel several weeks ago, her family spent over an hour remembering things about their beloved mother and grandmother and cousin. Remembering is one of the most important things we can do.

Interestingly, the psalmist ends his psalm with an agricultural metaphor: “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” And he even promises, “Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.” They shall, in other words, complete their harvest.

We know a lot about harvest here in Hillsboro, KS. First there was the wheat harvest, then the soybeans, and the milo, and the corn. In what other ways have you completed a harvest this past year? What sheaves have you carried in? What jobs or tasks have you accomplished? Is harvest part of the meaning of joy? Even when the yield or the grain prices aren’t particularly great? I bet our farmers can tell us.

Back briefly to the prophet Isaiah, he shared with his people a vision that he had had, a vision in which the words he spoke were the very words of God. In verse 8 we read, “For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense.” Who, in our community or country or world, deserves recompense, good for good, judgment for judgment? Who deserves God’s justice?

And then in the Gospel of Luke, the virgin Mary, after the angel Gabriel had announced to her that she would give birth to the Christ child, picks up on this theme of justice and recompense. “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” What justice do you long for, either in your own lives or in the world? What recompense have you already witnessed? Is justice part of the meaning of joy?

At the beginning of her Magnificat, the virgin Mary talks about her own “lowliness” as a servant of God. What did she mean? That she is lowly in comparison to God? Which would be both stating the obvious, and an appropriate thing to say as an expression of worship (which is what the Magnificat is). Or did she mean more than that? Was she referring to her lowliness as a pregnant, possibly teen-age, unwed woman in 1st century Palestinian society? Was she talking about her position at the very bottom of the societal totem pole? Or might she even have been confessing her own inner sense of low self worth? And then, having confessed it, she goes on to marvel, “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me.”

Human worthiness (or rather, lack thereof) in face of God is one of the key themes in the Bible. Is it also a key theme in your own life? Do you sometimes feel like you’re at or near the bottom of society’s totem pole? Do you struggle with your own sense of unworthiness or low self-worth? And on the other hand, is our true worthiness, which is gifted and guaranteed by God, part of the meaning of joy?

And finally, the Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the new church in Thessalonica, told the believers there to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing,” and to “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God.” Is thankfulness part of the meaning of joy? If so, I would encourage both you and myself, maybe later today when you light your three Advent candles, to think about the many things for which you and I are thankful today, on this Third Sunday of Advent, midway between Thanksgiving and Christmas, in this season of waiting and penitence, of long nights and all-too-short days (and sometimes cloudy weather), this season where colored lights and festive decorations can belie the reality that joy can seem excruciatingly difficult if not impossible to find?

And perhaps this is because we confuse joy with happiness. Joy, I suggest to us all, comes in part from knowing that God is near us. It comes in part through comforting and being comforted when we are sad or grieving. It comes in part from the restoration we have experienced or are in process of experiencing following some sense of devastation in our lives. It comes from remembering, with 2020 vision, the many blessings God has granted us through the years and even this past year. Joy comes from the seasons and experiences of harvest. It comes wherever and whenever the justice God loves is loved also by us. Recognizing our worthiness in the eyes of God is surely a powerful source of true, authentic joy. And a spirit of ongoing thankfulness is one wonderful way to maintain it. May each one of you be filled with joy in the days and weeks and seasons to come.

Amen.