

## **Christmas Presence (aka Choosing Joy)**

### **Psalm 98 and Luke 2:8-15**

Note: Psalm 98 is the basis for the carol, "Joy to the World."

This morning we reflect on what might be the most pervasive theme of the advent & nativity story: joy. Joy announced, joy given, and joy received.

Our reading is a familiar one, and although I didn't grow up going to church, I knew this reading, and this story, because... I watched the Charlie Brown Christmas special every year! And here is Linus' response, on the stage of their Christmas production, when Charlie Brown asks, "Isn't there anyone who can tell me what Christmas is all about?!?"

### **Luke 2:8-15**

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,  
'Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and

see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

I probably say this every Advent season, that when Heidi and I go for evening walks or are driving at night, we notice that every year people are putting up their Christmas lights earlier and earlier. And more of them! There are so many new kinds of lights available to get, some of them programmable and connected to our phones so we can make them do all sorts of fun displays. It's clear that people are longing for something to lift their spirits; to give them a boost. To add some light to the shorter days and dark evenings.

I also notice every year the increasing number of Hallmark and other Christmas movies that are being made. There are over 100 new Christmas movies that were made *just this year*. That adds up to over 500 of these movies the past few years, with more cable channels that show these Christmas movies all year long if you want to watch them. These movies are very popular. Because, people are longing for something positive to lift their spirits. Television folks call this counter programming. Programming that is counter to the other material on tv that, well, doesn't lift peoples' spirits.

Now, lights are cheerful in winter and Christmas movies are a nice diversion, yet, I wonder if these, alone, can sustain someone for the long haul.

We need a deep and lasting joy that can provide the strength and sustenance we need for our journey. We need joy.

The joy we celebrate at Advent and Christmas is both a gift and a choice. Joy is something that *is announced to us and comes to us*, and... it is also something we can *choose to have*.

Henri Nouwen, who wrote so beautifully about the Christian life and faith, asks: "Is it really possible to be joyful in the midst of the shadows of difficulty and sorrow?" Good question! He answers his own question: "While happiness usually depends on circumstances, joy runs deeper. Joy," he writes, "is the experience of remembering and knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – not sickness, not failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take that love away. Thus, joy and sorrow can not only coexist; joy can even be found and expressed in the midst of those circumstances." Hence the apostle Paul can say, "Rejoice in the Lord *always*" and "be joyful in *all* circumstances."

And because we are comforted by the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally, and that nothing can take that love away, we can rejoice in anticipation of good things coming. The good things may not be what we expect or wish for, but we can rejoice now in anticipation of good things in our future, as

God brings them to each of us, and to the world, in God's good timing. We aren't in control of outcomes, right? But God's outcomes, when they arrive, are always good and worthy of our gratitude and rejoicing.

Therefore, the joy we celebrate on this third Sunday of Advent is the joy of anticipation. That's why the candle is pink—theoretically, it's a mixture of the purple and the white—which usually makes lavender, but to stand out a bit more someone made it pink, to symbolize joy more apparently. It means, we're getting close! It's a sign of anticipation. Obviously, we celebrate the anticipation of Christmas and remember that capital L Love became human in the person Jesus Christ. And also... as part of our choosing joy, we rejoice in anticipation good things coming in our lives and in the world.

Joy is such an important gift. So much so, that joy has been an essential Christian virtue in the church, historically. After all, it is one of the fruit of the Spirit—listed second, after love. That's how important it is to our faith.

And consider this: to be canonized as a saint in the Catholic church, of the qualifications for sainthood, there has to be proof of joy in the candidate. I appreciate that the Catholic Church recognizes that joy is saintly! I know there are some Catholics who need to get that message; but so do some Presbyterians! I've met several scrooge-like Presbyterians over the years!

About a century after the Protestant Reformation, with all of its conflicts and excommunications, religious intolerance and political rancor, a quiet man named Brother Lawrence wrote a classic little book titled, *Practicing the Presence of God*, and in it he said, very simply: “Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God.” That’s a bold statement. Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God. That was a needed affirmation at that time! And might be for our time too.

And to bring it up to the present, South African bishop Desmond Tutu authored a book titled *The Book of Joy* in which he stares into the despair and difficulty in the world and finds joy as the way out, and the way forward. Because, he says, joy is how we experience God’s presence.

All of this shows us how important joy has been to Christ’s church, and continues to be.

If there is one theme that permeates the entire Christmas story—from the prophets foretelling of it, to the angels’ announcement of it, to the participants’ experience of it—it is joy. It is perhaps *the main theme* that surrounds the birth of Christ (before and after).

We heard it from the prophet Isaiah in our candle lighting liturgy, who said: “Lord, you have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice

before you as those who rejoice at the harvest.” That passage concludes with the famous words: “for to us a child is born, a son is given....”

The angel announces to the shepherds good news of **great joy!** I’m so glad that the angel didn’t say, “I bring you the announcement of God’s serious displeasure with humanity and the potential of his imminent wrath if you all don’t straighten up!” No, it was good news! Of great joy.

And almost all of the carols we sing this season invite us to rejoice, to have joy. Christmas is all about joy. Because Christ coming to earth *is* great news, *and*, because having joy is largely how we experience God. That may sound bold, but Brother Lawrence and Desmond Tutu are speaking truth when they say that joy is the surest sign of the presence of God—it’s a sign to us, and a sign to others. That’s why it’s such a prominent theme. Because God wants us, and everyone, to experience his presence, and the true meaning of Christmas, through rejoicing.

And we rejoice regardless of, or sometimes *in spite of*, what’s going on around us, and sometimes in spite of how we *feel* about it all. Because joy transcends circumstances. And because the good news is: we are loved unconditionally by the Creator of the universe.

Just like the Who's down in Whoville could sing songs of joy, even though the Grinch *thought* he stole Christmas by stealing all of their decorations and presents. What the Grinch didn't know is: joy is an inside job. And that *can't* be taken away. That was the Who's big secret! Real joy is an inside job; and it's something we choose to have and express, no matter what's going on around us, and sometimes in spite of how we feel.

Why rejoice? At this time, or at any time? Because God wants us to encounter Jesus Christ, and experience his presence and his love. And God wants us to know that the announcement of Christ's birth *is good news!* None of the grinsches of our lives or in the world can take joy away from us, or prevent us from rejoicing.

As we encounter Jesus Christ this Advent and Christmas season, I'd like to remind us about one simple practice we can employ as a way of choosing joy: the practice of living in the present. Of trying to live in the present. That's why the title to this sermon is "Christmas *presence.*" I was trying to be clever with a play on words!

This is a simple practice, but not always easy. Especially these days because there is so much uncertainty! There is so much we don't know, and so much to

figure out. But that's precisely why it's such an important practice, now, as much as ever. Because the uncertainty and the ambiguity can get to us, if we don't take time to be present to the here and now, and in doing so find joy in what's right in front of us, day by day, moment by moment.

Poet Mary Oliver goes as far as to say, "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work." Spoken like a true poet!

It does take some effort to try to live in the present; to try to be present to God, and present to life in the here and now. But joy is there for us when we can begin to have moments when we live in the present, and encounter God in our present moments throughout each day.

When we can do that, we might be surprised at what we see and experience, especially if we are open to wonder and amazement. Because there *is* so much to see and appreciate all around us. I've talked about Anne Lamott's wonderful little book on prayer titled, "Help, Thanks, Wow." We're pretty good at "help," and "thanks." She's advocating that an essential part of prayer is being present and open to the moment, and saying "Wow!" to what we see and experience.

For example, a sunrise from last Friday (from our back deck). Wow, right?!?



Pastor and author Barbara Brown Taylor, in one of her books, describes her journey toward Christian faith this way: “The parts of the Christian story that had drawn me into the community of faith were not the *believing* parts but the *beholding* parts: “*Behold*, I bring you good tidings of great joy.” “*Behold*, the Lamb of God.” “*Behold* (Jesus says), I stand at the door and knock...” Whether the narratives starred shepherds confronted by hosts of glittering angels, or desert pilgrims watching something like a dove descend upon a man in a river as a voice from heaven called him “Beloved,” Christian faith seemed to depend on beholding things that were clearly beyond belief.”

My journey is similar to hers, so I resonate with what she’s saying.

Behold! It’s God’s way of saying: “Pay attention! Be present to what’s right in front of you, and you’ll find moments of joy, amazement, serendipity, and perhaps a message from me that you need in that moment.”

Richard Wagamese (Ojibwe native, from Ontario, Canada), wrote a wonderful book of reflections/meditations, which contains this gem:

I have been referred to as odd before.  
Nowadays, I prefer to refer to myself as “awed.”  
I want awe to be the greatest ongoing relationship  
in my life.  
I want to move through my days  
floored by the magnificence and generosity of my Creator.

The breaking of a day,  
the silence between words,  
the light emanating from  
kindness, truth, love and  
the apparently random hand of grace:  
I want to remain gobsmacked by all of it.  
Rendered speechless by wonder,  
I await the next unfolding.  
Peace, friends.  
Be awed today.

Much of life is simply about showing up and paying attention (as mentioned last week). Definitely, most of the *spiritual* life is about paying attention, being present and aware. Yogi Berra (famous for his funny and off-the-wall quotes): 90% of life is half mental. Actually, 90% of life is simply showing up, being present and aware; paying attention. Because God is present everywhere. You cannot *not* be in God's presence! The issue is, can *we* be present to God's presence throughout our days, in the big things and the little things. Because God is present to us, always.

And that's what we celebrate at Christmas—the gift of God becoming human; what we call the incarnation. Emmanuel, God *with us*. Present with us, always, everywhere, in the big things and the small things. And so the issue is not, “Where is Jesus?” The issue is, “Where am *I*?” Am I here—right here, right now? Present and aware, looking and listening. Or am I somewhere else: perhaps

rehashing the past, or worrying about the future? Our minds tend to go either backwards or forwards much of the time, which is why being present takes some effort, to be in the here and now and experience God's presence, God's joy.

One final reflection on this theme of joy, from Psalm 98. As mentioned, the great hymnwriter Isaac Watts based his Christmas carol "Joy to the World" on this psalm. He interpreted this psalm, wisely, as anticipating the coming of Christ, which he rightly saw as a joyful event. Hence, the exuberant feel of the carol, mirroring the joyful feel of Psalm 98.

But check this out, in verse 9 it says: "...for the Lord is coming... *to judge the earth.*" The Lord is coming... to judge. Let's take that one line for a moment and ponder our response to hearing that pronouncement. That the Lord is coming to judge. What is your—or anyone's—reflexive visceral response to hearing those words, "God is coming to judge"? Most people's gut response is, "Uh oh." I'm in trouble. Or, *somebody* is in trouble! There's gonna be a reckoning. You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout I'm telling you why: Jesus is coming to town! And he's coming to straighten you out.

But note the tone of the Psalm! It is nothing like that. It says things like, "Make a joyful noise, all the earth!" and "Sing praises!" and "Let the sea roar, and

the world along with it. Let the fields and floods clap their hands and sing together... for joy!" Because, the Lord is coming; he is coming to judge the earth. Justly and fairly.

The Psalmist's response to the Lord's appearance and judgement is... Yay! Woo-hoo! God is coming, and the earth is thrilled about it. So, let's rejoice together! Because, what the Lord brings at his coming is not condemnation, or fear. There is not a hint of fear in this passage, and others like it. This is not like mother saying to the children, "Wait til your father gets home from work! You've really have it coming to you then." All the while trembling with fear until dad's appearing. It's not like that!

It's nothing but an anticipation of justice, righteousness (right relationship), and equity/fairness. Which suggests an anticipation of mercy, grace, unconditional love, and understanding.

And the appropriate response to *that* kind of anticipation is... rejoicing.

Let's sing Joy to the World