

Choosing Joy Luke 1:39-55

This morning we reflect on what might be the most pervasive theme of the advent & nativity story: joy. Of receiving and choosing God's gift of joy.

Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

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

Have you noticed that people put up their Christmas lights early? And a lot of them! We have done the same at our house—we have lights everywhere: on the back deck, below the back deck, in the carport, on the front of the house, inside the house around the windows. It's clear that people are longing for something to lift their spirits, give them a boost. Add some light to the dark days and evenings. To bring... joy!

The joy we celebrate at Advent and Christmas is both a gift and a choice. Joy is something that *comes to us and is announced to us*, and... it is also something we can *choose* to have. I've been singing an old carol to myself this week (because it's been on our readerboard outside): "O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, o tidings of comfort and joy." They go together. And we need both this year! Comfort and joy (among other things).

Henri Nouwen, who wrote so beautifully about the Christian life and faith and prayer a few decades ago, asks: "Is it really possible to be joyful in the midst of the shadows of difficulty and sorrow?" 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” (and we can add: pandemic). “Thus (he continues) 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. Of good things in our future, as God brings them to us, and to the world. We aren't in control of outcomes, but God's outcomes, when they arrive, are always good and therefore worthy of praise.

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 probably 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 remembering that capital L Love became incarnate in the person Jesus Christ. And also... as part of our choosing joy, we rejoice in anticipation good things coming in our life 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, Biblically.

And consider this: to be canonized as a saint in the Catholic church, of the many qualifications for sainthood, there has to be proof of joy in the candidate. I love it that the Catholics, at least, recognize that dourness and seriousness are not on the list of the Fruit of the Spirit! I know there are some Catholics who need to get that message; but so do some Presbyterians!

About a century after the Protestant Reformation, with all of its conflicts and excommunications 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: “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.

That’s how important joy has been to Christ’s church, and his people.

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 last week (ch.9): “Lord, you have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as those who rejoice at the harvest... for to us a child is born, a son is given.”

The angels announce to the shepherds good news of **great joy!** I'm so glad that the angels didn't say, “We 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!” It was good news! Of great joy.

As we heard in our reading this morning, when Mary greets Elizabeth and after she hears Elizabeth's words of blessing, she sings, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit *rejoices* in God my savior.” Her response is joy and rejoicing.

And almost all of the carols we sing this season invite us to rejoice, to have joy. Christmas is all about joy. Because Christ's birth *is* great news, *and*, because having joy is mainly how we experience God. That may sound bold, but Brother Lawrence is onto something when he says 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.

Pope Francis, during an Advent mass, said: "Faith is not a philosophy, but an encounter with the person Jesus Christ. So go forth, and meet the Lord." In order to truly encounter Jesus, the pope said, we need to "remain vigilant in prayer, diligent in charity, and exultant in joy and praise."

I love what he says here. Faith is not a philosophy, but an *encounter* with the living Jesus Christ. And to truly encounter Jesus, we need to remain vigilant in prayer, diligent in charity, and exultant in joy and praise."

And we pray and serve and rejoice, regardless of (or sometimes in spite of) what's going on around us, and sometimes in spite of how we feel about it. One morning on a radio station that was playing Christmas music, and had just played "Joy to the world," one of the hosts of the program said: "How can we sing songs of joy at a time like this, when the world and our country especially seems to be in such turmoil?" How can we sing songs of joy at a time like this? The answer is: for the same reason that the people of old sang songs of joy in hard times: because God has broken through and revealed himself in the person of Jesus

Christ, who brings hope to the world, no matter what's going on. 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. 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? Especially in times like this? 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 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. I almost titled this sermon "Christmas *presence*."

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

But that's 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 try to find joy in it.

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

Because, as David affirms in Psalm 16:11: "In your presence, Lord, there is fullness of joy." I wonder how many of us believe that. And I wonder how we would reflexively finish that sentence if we didn't know it already: "In your presence, Lord, there is fullness of _____." What would you reflexively put there? This might be a good little exercise, something to think about in a quiet moment of reflection. Some people might finish the sentence saying, "In your presence is fullness of judgment (or criticism)." Or, "In your presence is fullness of expectations" (do better, try harder, be good). I know some who would say, "In God's presence is fullness of boredom"—because God wants to take all our fun away; or, because we'll spend eternity sitting on fluffy cloud, wearing a toga, playing the harp. That sounds boring! And it isn't true; that's a faulty view of heaven. I'll explain why another time.

I know many would say, "In your presence, Lord, there is fullness of love, which is also true, because God is love. However, David says "joy" and Psalm 16 is a good example of David being present, looking all around him and finding joy in God's presence. Go check out Psalm 16.

Pastor and author Barbara Brown Taylor has said, that one of the most important words in the Bible is: "Behold!" (or) "Look!" It's God's way of saying "Pay attention! Be present to what I'm doing, or saying." "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy." J the B: "Behold, the lamb of God." Look! Pay attention

Most of life is simply paying attention. And most of the *spiritual* life is 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 showing up, being present and aware; paying attention. Because grace happens to everyone (Jesus tells us in the sermon on the mount in Matt.6: he sends sunshine and rain for *everyone*; we call that common grace; so, grace happens to everyone), and 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; the incarnation. Emmanuel, God *with us*. Present with us, always, everywhere, in the big 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? Awake 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 a lot 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.

In closing, let me make two small suggestions for ways to stay present and find joy. First: Play. Give yourself permission to do fun things. Find something that makes you laugh. Watch a funny movie. Look up ridiculous Christmas related puns on your computer (like we've been doing for our readerboard). Go for a walk and see the fun lights that people have put up. Crank up the Christmas music. Whatever you need to do to lighten up and get to a joyful, peaceful place. I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like I *have to be* serious about things. Truthfully, we *have to* be able to lighten up.

Along those lines, here is a wonderful quote from GK Chesterton: “Joy... is the gigantic secret of the Christian. It is really a natural trend to lapse into taking

oneself gravely because it is the easy thing to do. For solemnity flows out of people naturally; but laughter is a leap. It is easy to be heavy, but hard to be light. Satan fell by force of gravity.” Nice play on words there!

Joy is our secret weapon! Even if it takes some work to choose and receive it. So, play. Play helps us focus on what’s right in front of us. To play is to be like a child again, and Jesus thought that was a pretty good idea. In fact, he said that if we don’t change and become like children, we won’t see the Kingdom of heaven. So in a way, Jesus was saying that one way to see heaven is to live in the present, like children. To have a sense of awe and wonder and joy.

Finally: we can find joy by giving it away. We create joy for ourselves when we create it for someone else, or just spread it around. One simple way to do that: smile. Seriously 😊. Smile. Even though you’re wearing a mask around others. Our eyes can say it all. Mother Teresa once said that “Peace begins with a smile” (that would’ve been better for last week, but still...). Smiling is easy to do and it can make someone’s day. Because everyone is carrying some kind of burden of some kind. That’s a safe assumption. So a smile can help ease it.

Heidi is great at this, and she will say this is what she does as a chaplain and manager of spiritual care at Children's Hospital. Look people in the eye—parents, children, her staff, nurses, doctors—and just smile at them.

Do this, knowing that God smiles upon you. Let that be a good mental image for you to take with you today. God smiles upon you. In the words of the traditional priestly blessing, God's face shines upon you. Let that lighten your heart, and bring you joy.

Stick around to sing "Joy to the World!"