

Joy of Advent

Christmas Feelings: Part 3 “Joy of Advent”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – December 17, 2023

3rd Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Reflection: Psalm 126

Greeting: A voice is crying out: “Clear the Lord’s way in the desert!” “Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God!” Go up on a high mountain, messenger Zion! Raise your voice and shout “Here is your God!”

Prayer: Merciful God, you sent the prophets as your messengers to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to listen to their warnings and to let our lives be changed through your grace. Help us once more to celebrate the nativity, and that we may rejoice in the coming of Jesus Christ our redeemer. Prepare our hearts for the feelings of Christmas that you stir with your steadfast love and strengthen by your faithfulness that endures forever. May you build us up with feelings of hope, peace, joy, and love as we celebrate the birth of our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, from this day forth and forevermore. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

(Psalm 126 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 126 and hear of restoration and joy. That we discover laughter in God’s comfort. That we discover joy when we remember all that the Lord has done. That there is a reversal in fortunes for those who put their trust in the Lord. How do you prepare for the joy that we find in Christ? How can you help others to know and experience that joy? What does it mean to you to share the spirit of joy we find at Christmas? Does the joy have to be big? Can it be something small? What does it mean to be a joy filled presence in a troubled world? How do you prepare your heart and life for the miracle that is Christmas?

Prayer: Lord, prepare our hearts for the feelings of Christmas this Advent. That we come before you this day experiencing the joy that we find in preparing for the coming of our Savior.

May your Holy Spirit guide us from darkness into the light of your love. As we come before you today, we bring to you the joys and concerns that we have spoken aloud together and shared in this place. We come to you silently with the worries and celebrations of our hearts. We pray you will help us to grow in faith through both sorrow and gladness. That through our laughter and our tears you will be with us. May we experience your mercy as you guide us in hope, peace, joy, and love in a celebration of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Isaiah chapter 61, verses 1 through 4 and 8 through 11.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my whole being shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 NRSV)*

Our next reading for today comes from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verses 16 through 24.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 NRSV)*

Our last reading for today comes from John chapter 1, verses 6 through 8 and 19 through 28.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why, then, are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. (John 1:6-8, 19-28 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week we take a look at the joy of Advent. As we get closer to Christmas, we begin to explore more deeply these Christmas feelings that we get. And we can think of the many reasons that the Christmas season may bring us joy. There's the joy of celebration. There is the joy of expectation. There are many ways that we experience the joy of Christmas in our lives. And that joy is reflected in the readings for today. We saw it in our reflection for today from Psalm 126. We hear about the joy that we find in God's care. That our sorrow is turned into joy and that we can rejoice in God's love and faithfulness. We hear about that joy in the rest of our readings today as well. The simplest is in 1 Thessalonians. We see the joy in celebrating the people that you share your faith journey with. Paul is talking about rejoicing and being in constant prayer. Paul is constantly thankful in his letters for the people that are with him in Christ. We get this idea of always celebrating, always rejoicing, and always praying. That you invite the Holy Spirit to fill you with joy. That you hold on to what is good, and you let go of what isn't. That you allow joy to be a part of your life so that you can let go of the negative things in your life.

We continue to see this in our other readings for today. And you might think that our Gospel reading this week sounds a little familiar. You would be correct, as we have another look at John the Baptist proclaiming the coming of Christ. This time it is from the Gospel of John. You'll note that we get the same quotation of Isaiah, but in a slightly different form this week. We get a little more detail about John and who he is, or more accurately, who he isn't. We do get from our reading that John the Baptist is a witness to the light and that people would come to believe through him. This helps to show John in a slightly different light than we may be used to. Because we often think about John on fading into the background as Christ begins his public ministry. Instead, we are given a picture of John setting the stage for Christ, bringing people to faith with his message of repentance and a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The joy in this reading is that John is out proclaiming the good that is to come. He is preparing the way for people to discover Christ. Now, the Pharisees have come to question John the Baptist. They want to know who he is so they can put him into a category and know how to deal with

him. So, they begin to ask their questions. Is he the Messiah? He's not the Messiah. Is he then Elijah? No, he says he is not Elijah. Is he perhaps the prophet? No. Then who is he? Who is John the Baptist? He says that he is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness to make a straight way to the Lord. So, they then want to know why he is baptizing people if he is not any of those people. John answers that he is preparing the way for one who will come after him. That he baptizes with water, and as we read last week, one will follow him that will baptize with the Holy Spirit. One he is unworthy to untie the sandal of. And he is of course talking about Jesus. There is a joy in preparing the way, as it is sharing the good news with people that something greater is coming. The joy of knowing that there is something so great and wonderful just around the corner. John is proclaiming a message of repentance to prepare the way for that great joy.

We get the fullest picture of joy from Isaiah. Isaiah has been prominent throughout Advent because there's a lot that the prophet Isaiah has to say. And this time we have good news that brings joy. Who is this good news for? It is for the oppressed and the brokenhearted, for the captives and the prisoners. The good news is for those who are mourning. I think that's something awesome to think about, that there is a wonder to that. That those who need the good news the most are going to hear it. Comfort for those who are mourning, release for those held captive. That the people will be built up instead of torn down. That there is to be an everlasting covenant to rejoice in God's presence because we have been clothed in the garments of salvation. That God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up for all the nations. And we get an idea of this incredible and overwhelming joy. That we see it in this celebration of God's love. The joy of knowing that God is a God of justice and forgiveness. That we have a God who loves his people and cares for them. That we have a reason to be joyful.

I think there is a lot to be said for this because it's easy to overlook the joy. Not because we don't have joy. Christmas brings us all sorts of joy. But I think there's a difference between the simple joys we may find and the joy that comes from knowing a God of justice and strength for his people. That isn't to say that we shouldn't have all those different joys. But I think we use them to build up to some of those bigger joys. That we have the joys of putting up the tree, watching movies, baking cookies, giving gifts, and singing Christmas carols. It is those joys that should inspire us to give more joy. That is one of the things that came to mind as I was preparing for this third Sunday of Advent. That as we prepare for Christmas, we let those joys remind us of the greater joys that we have in Christ. The joy that inspires us to share joy. But we shouldn't let those joys be the end of the joy that we strive for. Instead, we let those joys build us up in the greater joys we find with God. That we let them inspire us to share the message of a God who loves justice and hates wrongdoing. We share the joy of a God who turns mourning into dancing and turns our sorrowful tears into laughter. That we can have the joy of a God who gives us comfort in every distress and strength in the face of adversity.

And I started to think about that in the way that we think about God when we think about Christmas. Especially about, as we have talked about for the last two weeks, our Emmanuel,

that God is with us. That Jesus is that divine presence of God in our lives. Jesus brings to us baptism by the Holy Spirit. That John brought an initial joy of being forgiven, but that joy becomes greater in Christ with a message of salvation and eternal life. That we go from a smaller joy to a greater joy. And I started thinking about how that transition from John to Jesus. The idea of preparing for joy to receive an even greater joy. Preparing to receive joy so that we can give joy. John is out there preparing people for one greater than himself by baptizing with water and a message of repentance. That he is turning people to God so that they would find their Emmanuel, God with them, to help them discover joy. The joy of fellowship. The joy of having hope that there is something more to this life. Hope that things can change. Hope that bad situations can get better. The joy of knowing peace. A peace that comes from knowing in your heart that Christ is with you. The joy from knowing that Christ enables you to be a peaceful presence to others. The joy that comes from the peace and the hope that we find in our Emmanuel.

When I think about that, I begin to understand what it means to prepare for joy. That it's not that we're getting ready to be happy. It's that we're figuring out how to receive joy so that we may give joy. That we take those Christmas feelings that we get and we multiply them. We do it so that they continue to grow so that the light continues to shine ever brighter. And we do it because of the small joy that we find in a child born and laid in a manger. The joy of motherhood it brings to Mary. The joy of celebration it brings to shepherds who watched their flocks by night. The joy that John has in knowing the one greater has come. The joy that builds and grows. That we are called to prepare ourselves so that that joy can continue to build and continue to grow. That it starts with our own recognition of what Christ means to you, to what the birth of our Savior means in your life. And even if you just start with that one thought, it is a place to start. What does it mean to you that God is with us? Why does it matter to you that Christ was born on Christmas Day? What joy does it bring you? And you take the joy that you find there, and you share it. You share it so that it grows and that the joy of our Savior is shared. That all may know hope. That all may know peace. And that because of Christ our Lord, all may know joy. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Christmas Feelings

Our Advent and Christmas series is called "Christmas Feelings." We will be looking at the feelings we have from Advent, Christmas, New Year's Day, and Epiphany. Each week takes on a different feeling and how we carry them with us as we look forward to another year with Christ. Let's celebrate our Christmas feelings!

12/3: Hope of Advent 12/10: Peace of Advent 12/17: Joy of Advent
 12/24: Love of Advent 12/24: Celebration of Christmas
 12:31: Old and New Year 1/7: Gift of Christmas

Prayer List

Rev Angie Lee	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Eric Veach
Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney
Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart
Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Chuck Hogan
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Stanley Kiser
Corine Howard	Don Gilmore	Shirley Jester	Marsha Overton
Linda Carlen	Michael Nichols	Paul Cox	Taylor Waldorf
Harriet Tucker	Marlene Kincaid	Cara Dillier	Peggy Farley
Mandy Schumacher	Ann McMorris	Marci Cutts Smith	Jaydelyn Brassard
Pat Hayden Titus	Calvin St. Michael	Devona Dittamore	Nancy McElravy
Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson
Evelyn Sue Icenogle	Greg Williams		

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