

## Joy!

### 3rd Sunday of Advent, Year A – *Magnificat* and Matthew 11:2-11

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 11, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Though I seldom emphasize it much, if you have been listening to our candle lighting prayers each week, or paying careful attention to the readings and the sermons, you might have noticed that each of the four weeks of Advent customarily has a specific theme. The first week, we lit a violet candle and talked about hope. Then last week, another violet candle for Peace. And this week, we finally got to the rose candle, in the middle of the season.

Let's try something this morning: a little exercise from the early Church fathers and mothers. Let me ask you to close your eyes for a moment and turn inward to find how you react to a single word. It's a short one; it won't take long. Ready?

We light the rose candle... for *joy*.

Joy. Okay, did you find gladness for the tastes you have, or *have* had of joy in your life? Or did you find sadness for joy's *lack* in your life? The sound of the word *itself* can create a longing in the soul. It is a bright sound, a bell-like sound, singing of something good and wonderful.

Joy. Here in the center of the season, we are meant to be especially reminded... of *joy*. If we were still using Latin, we would call this *Gaudete* Sunday – “Rejoice” Sunday – from the canticle we use this morning in place of our usual Psalm, the *Magnificat*, the *Song of Mary*, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit *rejoices* in God my savior!”

Joy. The season of Advent is a season shot through with joy. Joy for what God has done in coming to us two thousand years ago. Joy for what God *will* do when his Christ returns to roll creation up like a scroll. Joy for what God is doing right *now* to prepare us at that coming to be wrapped in the arms of Christ and carried into the *everlasting* joy of heaven.

Joy. I tried to paint a bit of a picture for you the last time Paul was telling the Philippians to, “Rejoice in the Lord...always, and again I say rejoice.”

Joy. Do you have and taste the joy which Advent proclaims? And if not, *why* not? If your answer is “I don't” or perhaps, “not as much as I would like,” let me share a couple of things that occurred to me this week while I was thinking about our Scriptures this morning.

First of all, a whole lot of us get joy confused with happiness. Don't feel bad if that's what you've been thinking all along, because even the dictionary I looked in this week seems to have the two all jumbled up together. And that's a problem – because if you are looking for something while confusing it with something else, you probably won't be able to recognize it should it smack you in the face. Most of the world – I would argue, especially *our* world – just spins along as if one is the other. But for the Christian there is *definitely* a distinction.

Happiness, you see, is all about... me. Happiness is what I feel when I have life on my own terms. Happiness is what I have when life is as I want it to be. Happiness is being safe and comfortable and productive. Happiness is laying my head on a soft pillow in a warm bed behind secure doors. Happiness is health and beauty and prosperity. Happiness is the Dow at over 19,000. Happiness is getting what I want, and avoiding what I *don't* want. And there's nothing in the world wrong with being happy.

But on the *other* hand, at the center of *joy*... is God. Joy is finding reward in the *challenges* that beset you, finding blessedness in your *burdens*. Joy is laying down your head in peace even when *trouble* is at hand. Joy is what helps you go on in hope when illness strikes, and joy makes life livable when a beloved one can be seen no more. Joy gives us a garland instead of ashes. Joy bathes us in the oil of

gladness instead of mourning. Joy surrounds us with the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. Joy is knowing that our true treasure is not in how high we heap our resources, but in taking delight in *whatever* gifts we have been given – and using them to bring light to the world around us. Joy is the assurance that when others want to malign you or define you in terms that fit the bitterness or the darkness or the emptiness of their lives, you know that your worth is defined by your relationship to the creator of all that is. Joy is what is still true when terrorists and madmen strike, when mega-companies lie and cheat and steal, when politicians manage to meet even our lowest expectations. Joy is knowing that we are loved, even when we know that we are distinctly *un-loveable*.

Joy is simply our name for having Christ *in* us, because we have given ourselves, truly *given* ourselves to him, so that he dwells in us and we in him. The only thing joy has to do with *me* is that it is what *I* have when God and I are truly in communication, in communion, when God and I are together, in sync, when God and I are in... *relationship*.

Mary knew it from the moment when her perplexity of awe and wonder became, “Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” And when she met her cousin Elizabeth, herself alive with miraculous birth, and the one that would prepare the way leaped within his mother’s womb, Mary declared, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior.”

John the baptizer, who apparently didn’t worry too much about happiness – he dressed in cast off skins and ate what he could find in the desert, for pity’s sake – John knew the nature of true joy. Even as his own life was waning, even from the dungeon’s darkness, even when his head was the price of a king’s vanity, he sent word to know the truth that, “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

And, truth be told, we know it too. We know it every time we step off the rat race and out of *ourselves* long enough to again realize that as Christians, as human beings, we are defined by our relationship with our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer. We know it every time we let *our* hands be the hands that lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. We know it every time we let *our* voices be the voice that proclaims good news to the poor and the broken and the captive.

It is in *those* moments that we know joy: the calm, the peace, the serenity, the “lightness” that fills absolutely *every* moment, *every* molecule – *regardless* of circumstances – that fills *us* with the conviction, the clear *certainty* that God’s goodness and grace and mercy is working in and around and *through* us. *That* is joy, the fruit of our confidence in *Christ* and his absolute love for you, and for me.

I have been wrestling with some more thoughts about what goes wrong, what *robs* us of the joy that our heavenly Father wants for us. But I decided to save that for another time – with God’s grace, we’ll have plenty of other opportunities. For now, for *this* season, for *this* morning, for *this moment*, let me just wish you all the happiness of this blessed season of preparation and celebration.

But, more than that, let me wish you the deep abiding *joy* of the coming of the Lord into your heart and mine. May that joy be yours this season and *always*.