

Sermon December 11, 2022 ... Third Sunday of Advent

Gracious and holy God, the faith and hope you bless us with brings us joy, no matter what we are facing in our lives or in the world around us. Help us to be attentive to joy filled moments of grace. I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Today ... third Sunday of Advent ... our focus is on gift of joy ... inspired by gift of faith ... and promise of hope God offers us ... in one whose birth we will celebrate ... God's Son Jesus

Walk ... along Church St in town ... front porch of one house is beautifully decorated ... including a rustic wooden sign with knot holes leaning against wall ... simply says "joy"

Every time ... I walk by and see it ... I thank God for the reminder ... that in life I have so much to inspire joy in me ... things I might well often overlook ... because my mind and spirit are preoccupied ... and equally there is so much in this season that makes me joy filled too

So simple ... yet profoundly true ... when we strip away negativity in our lives ... and world ... and embrace hope filled joy ... that God opens up for us ... that God ultimately desires for us

Lesson ... in liturgical history ... 3rd Sun of Advent ... known as Gaudette Sunday ... Latin scholars know Gaudette means joy in Latin

Historically ... significant that focus was lighter on this middle Sunday of Advent ... because remember as said last week ... Advent traditionally observed in much same way as Lent is ... focusing on repentance ... as a spiritual discipline of preparation for our celebrations to come

Gaudette Sunday ... was and still is day when clergy wear rose coloured vestments ... if they have them ... to indicate joyful nature of this journey we are on ... pilgrimage we are making ... it is about a break in the penance ... to rejoice in hopeful anticipation

For me ... penultimate passage of scripture that calls us to rejoice ... Philippians 4 ... Paul says ... *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. The Lord is near."*

Notice Paul doesn't say ... rejoice sometimes ... or rejoice when you feel like it ... or rejoice when things are going well in your lives and in the world ... rather ... rejoice in Lord always

In reality ... may think impossible & unrealistic ... to be in constant state of joy ... even when bombarded by chaos of this world ... tragedies in lives ... that are anything but joy inspiring

Truth ... news gives us reports that deflate our joy ... potentially compromise our spirits

Sometimes ... hard to see even glimmer of light in darkness of world ... difficult to recognize God's healing grace when there's so much brokenness ... understandable when lose hope because of despair & grief experience ... with so much anger in world and people's lives

But ... truth of our faith ... center of all that God promises us ... especially in sending His Son Jesus to be among us ... is that there is always hope ... because God has promised his creation ... what experience now isn't all there is ... there is so much more ... and we will experience it fully ... through one whose birth we will celebrate ... and one whose coming again we await

As John says ... Revelation 21 ... *I am making all things new ... write this for these words are trustworthy and true* ... Eugene Peterson translates it ... *each word is dependable and accurate*

Particularly ... find the prophets so inspiring ... as we read them in Advent ... God speaking over 2000 years ago ... but equally God speaking today too ... and my do we need to hear ... and internalize ... and believe ... that spiritual truth and wisdom ... that is timeless

Isaiah 35:1-10 ... we read this morning ... reminds us of power of God ... transform harshest setting ... ultimately bring about a joy that is deep ... joy that is lasting ... joy that can't and won't be compromised ... or threatened ... no matter what's happening in our lives or in world

Result ... overwhelming joy ... because God can & God will do amazing things ... both literally and figuratively ... blind will see ... deaf will hear ... mute will speak ... lame will walk ... everything that holds us back ... everything that limits us ... will all be no more ... because God will initiate the healing ... & ultimately the renewal of his people & all creation

Isaiah ... assures his listeners ... including you and me here today ... that God will strengthen the weak hands ... make firm feeble knees

Suspect ... some of you might identify with me ... when I say my hands are feeling pretty weak as get older ... and my knees seem more and more feeble ... aches ... pains ... can't kneel down like once did

God assures us ... that we will be strengthened ... that we won't be crippled by arthritis ... that there will be no need for knee or hip replacements ... that we will easily dance with joy

Oh ... that that might be so!!

Appreciate Isaiah's reference ... crocus blooming in dry land

Think ... to when the first flowers of spring come up ... anticipation as daffodils break through the ground ... eventually blossom in bright yellow flower

Think ... of an amaryllis ... popular plant at this time of year ... bulb in the pot slowly grows its stock ... and then eventually the blooms appear ... open up

We ... received one as gift ... didn't plant bulb right away ... waited until Christmas decorations were put away ... perfect timing ... because it came into full bloom ... bright red flowers ... in midst of the bleak days of winter ... such a sign of hope ... truly brought joy

Remember ... being in New Mexico walking in dried out riverbed ... red clay cracking ... no source of water in sight ... and then there was single green leafy plant ... sprouting in one of cracks ... obvious sign of life ... nourished with water and nutrients that came from somewhere

Grateful for that moment ... receiving from God ... sign of all He promised ... that even in dry desert ... there are signs of hope and life ... of renewal ... which all inspire joy

How will it start... with His sending Jesus ... to love us ... forgive us ... inspire us ... equip us ... empower us ... but most importantly save us ... show us He means it ... when He says ... in his kingdom ... under his reign ... all things will be made new ... there will be a transformation ... things that have died will come back to life ... things that are broken will be healed ... instead of being weary and worn down ... our spirits will be revitalized with a renewed energy

And not just ours ... but all of creations too ... crisis in environment ... effects of global warming ... pollution contaminating oceans, lakes and rivers ... smog makes it hard to breathe ... ice fields melting compromising habitats of wildlife ... all of that too will experience new life ... returned to original glory ... when God looked around and said, "it is good"

Truth ... it was good ... and will be good again ... it was perfect ... and will be perfect again

Our ... own personal renewal ... and the restoration of creation ... that is certainly cause for joy ... when we remain hopeful ... when we don't give in to voices around us ... that speak only of doom and gloom ... and the disaster still likely to come upon us

No doubt ... may go through those days ... there may undoubtedly be hardships yet to come

But ... faith God has blessed us with ... encourages us to keep our eyes focused ... on the promise of God ... which will indeed come to be ... and in that to be inspired with great joy

With ... that assurance from God ... of all that will one day be a reality and our lived experience ... we can feel a sense of holy optimism ... that is grounded not in what we can do as human beings to make things right ... but what God will do for us

Colleagues this week ... challenged me on notion of optimism as people of faith ... even when I call it holy optimism ... because they said as people of faith ... we're not called to be optimistic ... but rather called to be hopeful

While ... I heard what they were saying ... I'm not so sure that our faith can't inspire both optimism and hope ... as long as we remember where that optimism and hope come from

Our optimism ... different from how world sees optimism ... it is sacred ... because as people of faith ... trust good news of Jesus ... optimism is grounded in hope ... inspired by God

We are optimistic ... is grounded in knowing God will redeem us and creation ... God will heal us and creation ... God will save us and creation ... gives us every reason to feel true joy

Something else ... to be reminded of ... is that joy and happiness ... not the same thing

Truth ... aren't promised happiness in our lives ... but we are assured we can experience joy

Joy ... comes from within ... isn't affected by difficult circumstances ... or lack of relationships ... or anything that might be stressing us ... or causing anxiety in given moment

Joy ... helps us appreciate the present ... to value this very moment ... rather than chasing what world tells us has most value ... because in the searching for what might be ... we lose out on what is ... and it's in that very present moment ... that God blesses us ... if only our eyes are open to see it ... and our hearts are ready to receive it

Joy ... doesn't depend on what if's ... whereas happiness is often what we anticipate feeling when this or that happens in our lives ... when I have more money, then I can be happy ... when I have more time, then I can be happy ... when I purchase a house, then I can be happy

But ... does any of that give us something that is lasting ... or is it something we feel in one moment ... which is gone in the next moment ... which in turn results in our chasing after something else ... which we expect will make us happier than we are right now

I know ... I fall into that trap ... even when know ... finding joy in moment ... whatever that moment is bringing into my life ... is so much more lasting ... ultimately so much healthier too

Spiritually ... and practically speaking too ... when we have joy at heart of our lives ... easier to be happy ... but it's much harder to be happy without experiencing joy

Joy ... brings us a peace within us which is beyond all understanding ... contentment ... and can only truly come into our experiences of life ... as a gift from God ... by the grace of God

Today ... take another step along advent journey ... I ask myself ... where do I experience joy ... especially when I'm not expecting it ... when open to gift of moment God is inviting me into

I know ... with my faith in Jesus at center of my being ... I have reason not just to have optimism ... but holy optimism ... and God inspires me not to search for happiness ... but joy

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