

Advent 3A (12/15/2019)

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146:5-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Joy and grief are not mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist. In fact, one can emerge from and complicate the other. Advent is a season of anticipation, of hopeful attentiveness to God's salvation. And, even when our hope is fragile, salvation can surprise us like a sudden blossoming of joy when and where we least expect it.

How do you feel about the pink candle? I've always been a little resistant to the Third Sunday of Advent, which is traditionally associated with joy. *Gaudete* Sunday, we've called it, Latin for "rejoice." But, joy is for Christmas, isn't it? Doesn't it defeat the purpose of Advent to insert an occasion for mandatory rejoicing right in the middle of a season that gives us permission to sit with the fact that the days are colder, the nights are longer, and signs of hope may be fewer and farther between? *Cheer up*, the pink candle seems to say, *look on the bright side*. But, **the call to rejoice may feel disjointed, even tone deaf, at this point in the season. Advent is for expectancy, yes, but not unadulterated joy. So, the pink sticks out from the blue like a sore thumb.**

Then again, no season can dictate the ways we should experience sadness or joy, doubt or trust, fear or hope. I'm not so naïve as to believe that Christmas will suddenly chase away every shadow in your life. After all, Jesus was born into a fearful world. Matthew's version of the story is decidedly short on angels'

singing and long on violence and displacement.¹ Clearly, Christmas doesn't erase the reasons for fear and grief. All any season of the church year can do is carve out a space on the calendar to contemplate one or another aspect of the life of faith: patience in Advent, for instance, or joy at Christmas.

So, why the insistence on joy today? **Is the expectation that I set Advent aside for a day and put on a happy face regardless of how I'm really feeling?**

As I've wondered about Gaudete Sunday again this year, however, I realize how often I've made joy and grief into a false dichotomy. The pink candle on the Advent wreath stands apart from the blue in a way that doesn't reflect the complexity of our lived experience. **Joy and grief are not mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist.**

Artist and author Jan Richardson makes this point in an Advent reflection called "In Sorrow and Celebration." At a party to mark the release of her new book, Richardson rejoiced at the presence of so many loved ones while simultaneously grieving the absence of her late husband.

Following so close on the third anniversary of Gary's death, it came as a particular grace to gather with these particular folks. We were there because of a book about grief. Yet in the midst of the sorrow we have each carried, there was the presence of joy, of hearts open to the ways that God leavens our grief with gladness.

She goes on to observe:

We sometimes draw sharp distinctions between grief and joy, sorrow and celebration. This is understandable, given how loss lays waste to our hearts and alters the world we have known and loved. The season of Advent,

¹ Matthew 2.

however, challenges the notion that joy and sorrow live in separate realms, that we can have one or the other but never both at the same time.²

The truth is that joy and grief are two sides of the same coin. How can we expect to know one without the other? In fact, experiences of joy can emerge suddenly from profound grief, as in the case of Jan Richardson's book release party, or vice versa. And, the two feelings can complicate, even compound each other.

The concurrence of perceived opposites is a fact of life. As we learn to accept the complexity of our existence, we rely less on either/or propositions and become more comfortable with a both/and reality. The prophecy in our first reading from Isaiah offers a striking example from nature: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, / the desert shall rejoice and blossom; / like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, / and rejoice with joy and singing." **The promise is that where God is active, where God makes a way through the wilderness for exiles to come home, even the wasteland is transformed.** *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.* "It's as if nature itself sings a chorus of 'Alleluia!'" writes one interpreter.³

The poetry sounds like a dream, a beautiful impossibility, that is, if deserts could never flourish. But they do! Just this year, the American Southwest experienced a super bloom – have you heard of this? Expanses of once-barren

² <https://adventdoor.com/2016/12/11/advent-3-in-sorrow-and-celebration/>.

³ Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4318.

landscape suddenly burst into color, blanketed with wildflowers. The 2019 super bloom was so vast that it could be seen from space.

A super bloom is the result of a fortuitous confluence of events. A dry season, which prevents invasive grasses from competing with wildflowers for moisture, must be followed by autumn rainfall abundant enough to reach wildflower seeds lying dormant deep in the soil, but not so abundant as to wash the seeds away in flash floods. Next, the soil must warm gradually in the early spring while atmospheric temperatures remain moderate. Finally, newly germinated plants must not be disturbed by strong winds. If the fates allow, a super bloom will occur once a decade.

Dear church, even in the harshest climate, the possibility of flourishing remains. The desert does not cease to be desert, but a sudden flowering defies our expectations. This is the significance of Gaudete Sunday: desolation, and in the midst of it, joy; weakness, and in the midst of it, strength; uncertainty, and in the midst of it, peace; *a thrill of hope*, and, if but for a moment, *the weary world rejoices*. Advent is a season of anticipation, of hopeful attentiveness to God's salvation. And, even when our hope is fragile, salvation can surprise us like a blossoming of joy when and where we least expect it.