

Advent 3B (12/17/2017)

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Rejoice always,” Paul urges us at the heart of Advent. But what joy is there to be had in hard times? The promise of Christmas is that “the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness.” But what light is there to be seen when the shadows seem to be lengthening? Could it be that the experience of joy, however fleeting, is itself a means of testifying to the light, of anticipating the fulfillment of God’s dream for the world?

“Rejoice always... give thanks in all circumstances... hold fast to what is good....” Paul’s exhortation is unequivocal: *Rejoice always*. That’s easier said than done though, isn’t it? The third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete* Sunday, Latin for “rejoice.” And to signify joy, we light a pink candle in the Advent wreath, a little burst of bright color amid the deep blue of the rest of the season. Deep blue, like the sky at dusk in December, the dying daylight that inevitably gives way to long nights.

Rejoice always, Paul urges us at the heart of Advent. But, what if we are not predisposed to joy, especially “in the bleak midwinter”? If you find yourself struggling to muster any holiday spirit at this time of year, you’re not alone. Cold nights have long symbolized grief and fear and lost hope. And, while some of us hide it better than others, we’re all familiar with the shadow side of human life. ***Rejoice always*, Paul urges us. But what joy is there to be had in hard times? The promise of Christmas is that “the dawn from**

on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness.”¹

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In the bleak midwinters of our lives – at those times when our personal burdens weigh the heaviest and public crises loom the largest – Paul’s encouragement to *rejoice always* may sound hollow. **While we long for the abundant life Christ promises, both for ourselves and for the world, we also recognize how far removed we are from it.**

So, what might it mean to rejoice even in the midst of our lament? When Paul refers to joy, I’m certain he doesn’t mean forced cheerfulness, or blissful ignorance, or escapism. Joy is not just an opioid, temporarily delaying the return of our pain. It’s not just “putting on a happy face.” No, **joy is something more profound. It’s a swelling of the heart, a visceral awareness of something truly good. Joy is the elation of looking into your child’s face and catching a glimpse of her future. It’s the lifting of the spirit when you reach the climax of a beloved piece of choral music. It’s the rush of hope at good news you didn’t expect to hear. It’s the sense of well-being that washes over you in the company of friends who you know will love you through anything.**

¹ Luke 1:78-79.

However fleeting, joy is a sacred gift, a glimpse of the goodness at the heart of God's purpose for creation. If only we could capture it, keep it, reproduce it at will. Yet, somehow joy escapes our efforts to manage it. In his account of his conversion to Christianity, C.S. Lewis describes the elusive nature of joy: "It is never a possession," he writes, "always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be.'"² As such, joy is accompanied by an ache, an urge, what Lewis calls "the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing."³ This is the deep-seated human longing for God's dream to be realized – the dream of a world finally rid of loss and grief and fear, a world with reason to *rejoice always*.

A community organizer from the United States once traveled to a remote part of Central America to join an indigenous community's struggle against the encroachment of a multinational agribusiness firm. The people faced a serious threat. The company's activities were endangering their lands, their livelihoods, their long heritage. And, their survival would require a herculean effort. Nevertheless, at the height of the resistance, the people were planning a street festival to last several days. This was a luxury the American organizer was sure they could not afford, so he expressed his concern to one of the community's leaders. "How can you stop and celebrate at a time like

² *Surprised by Joy*, 78.

³ *Ibid.* 72.

this?" he asked. Smiling, the leader replied, "I can tell that you haven't been involved in this struggle for very long."

Rejoice always.

In today's Gospel, we hear again the story of John, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" In the Fourth Gospel, John is not primarily "a baptizer, a prophet, an exhorter, or even a messenger of God," but a *witness*.⁴ John's sole purpose is "to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him." *Look!* he cries, *Jesus is on the way. Look! There is a flicker of hope in the obscurity of your own circumstances.* And in this way, John gives voice to "the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing" for a brighter day.

Could it be, dear church, that in the bleak midwinter, the experience of joy is itself a means of testifying to the light, of anticipating the fulfillment of God's dream for the world? After all, the shadows will eventually be chased away. The night that envelops us at dusk will recede again at dawn. And in the same way, the deep blue of Advent will give way to the radiant white of Christmas. "Joy to the world," we'll sing, "the Lord is come!"⁵

⁴ Gary W. Charles, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 71.

⁵ Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World," in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, #267.