

Tracy Daub  
12/12/21—University Presbyterian Church  
Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7

### A NEW SONG IN A STRANGE LAND

I wonder if when watching Molly and Bill light the pink candle on the Advent wreath this morning, if some of you thought they had made a mistake. It is a common misconception that the pink candle on the wreath is intended for the fourth and final Sunday in Advent. But actually Bill and Molly were correct because the pink candle is designated for the *third* Sunday in Advent. Way back in Christian history, Advent used to be a more penitential season much like Lent. In the midst of the Advent season filled with heavy subjects like repentance and contrition, the Church offered worshippers on the third Sunday a bit of a mid-season break by giving them a Sunday focused on joy. Thus we have the tradition of the pink candle, representing joy, on the third Sunday in Advent. And the lectionary gives us scripture passages for this Sunday that emphasize joy.

In our first reading the prophet Isaiah calls us to “shout aloud and sing for joy” for all God’s wondrous deeds. Then in our second reading, the apostle Paul tells the faithful, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice . . . “Do not worry about anything,” Paul instructs us, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

There are certain kinds of Christians out there--perhaps you have met them—Christians who adopt a kind of “always look on the bright side of life” approach to things. I call them “happy clappy Christians”—people who demand of each other a PollyAnna kind of cheerful faith that is divorced from the ugly, painful, unfair, and horrifying realities of life. At first it may

seem as if Isaiah and Paul fall into this category—with their summons to us to “sing for joy,” and “to rejoice in the Lord always,” and telling us “do not worry about anything.”

*Do not worry about anything?* Advice like that can seem totally insensitive and tone-deaf to the harsh realities people face--until you realize that both the prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Paul were well acquainted with suffering and hardship. Each of them wrote from a position of captivity. Isaiah wrote to his people in their collective time of captivity in exile, a time of sorrow and despair. Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians while literally sitting in a dark, dank Roman prison cell.

These two men were familiar with the landscape of adversity and suffering and yet they sing with joy and they summon each of us, in our own landscapes of hardship, to sing with joy as well. This earthly experience is a type of strange and foreign land through which we all must journey. In our lives we navigate through this landscape of pain, and loss, and grief, through the landscape of sad stories and violence and suffering, through the terrain of divisions and hatred and distrust of the other. And walking through this landscape we easily succumb to songs of despair and cynicism and bitterness. But Isaiah and Paul call us to sing a *new* song—a song called “joy.”

Let’s be clear: neither Isaiah nor Paul are calling us to “be happy.” Happiness is different than joy. Joy and happiness are close cousins but there is a difference. I invite you to think about a time when you experienced joy. Think about what made that emotion different from happiness. As we think about the two, many of us might conclude that joy is a more profound emotion than happiness. Joy often comes from a sudden or unexpected experience—when a beloved relative announces they are coming to visit, or the news that the diagnosis of cancer was a mistake and that you are going to be alright, or learning you won the lottery. Often joy is

experienced when something good comes our way and in many cases, that good thing was unplanned.

But joy is not only a feeling that arises from surprising good news. One of the most joyous moments many people experience is the birth of a child. But after the birth come the dirty diapers and all the challenges of each new developmental stage of childhood and adolescence. And yet, it is possible for that parent or grandparent or caregiver to continue to know a sustained feeling of joy that comes from being in that relationship. Maybe there is a view out your window that you see each day which, despite viewing over and over again, continues to bring you joy. Or the emotion you feel when each evening your beloved pet curls up beside you on the couch and gives you that look that clearly says, "I love you." So, sometimes joy comes from something unexpected and sometimes joy is a feeling that arises from something on-going, something sustained in our lives. This still leaves our understanding of joy somewhat murky.

This very question about joy caught the attention of some theologians at Yale Divinity School who a few years back began a research project on the theology of joy. While joy is certainly a favorable emotion, these theologians maintained that joy is more than just a good feeling. Rather, joy is feeling good *about* something good. This definition means that everyone, regardless of who they are, what they believe, where they come from, everyone can know joy. But as these researchers were theologians, they were looking at joy from within the perspective of faith. They were exploring the very question we are pondering today as we consider what the prophet Isaiah and the Apostle Paul meant when they called us to sing songs of joy.

There are some takeaways from this Yale project on the theology of joy. If joy is feeling good about something good, then as people of faith, the good we are focused on is the goodness

of God. Our joy is rooted in the goodness of God. And we will know more joy the more we are attuned to the goodness of God around us. This is what both Isaiah and Paul summon us to do. They summon us to recall the goodness of God who is not merely just nice to us but who has saved us, rescued us, from all kinds of harm. Isaiah alludes to the saving activity of God in the Exodus when the Jewish people were slaves. The Apostle Paul speaks to the saving love of God in Jesus Christ, how in Christ God rescued us from ourselves and from all forms of darkness and death. It is our awareness of God's goodness that brings us joy. One of the theologians in the study states that Christianity is a religion of joy. From the birth of Jesus on through the resurrection, God is involved in redeeming us from situations of harm. And the more we are aware of God's goodness to us, the more joy we will have.

Every day we are surrounded by God's goodness. It is right there in front of us, right there. But we often fail to recognize it. Sometimes God's goodness comes in ordinary packages that no longer inspire our wonder—in the beauty of the day, in the kindness of others, in the act of generosity, in the talents and skills we are privileged to use, in the marvel of our bodies. Or we discover goodness in face our shortcomings with the understanding that God nevertheless loves us. As one theologian in the project noted, "joy is rooted in one's giving attention to the goodness of God." Joy is rooted in being attune to the goodness of God.

This does not mean, having a "happy clappy" faith where we cling to the notion that all is good in life. Joy does not need everything to be ok. And that is what makes joy different from happiness. Happiness is dependent upon circumstances being good. And when circumstances shift and we experience loss and hardships, happiness tends to fade away. But with joy we can hold the reality of the world's brokenness in one hand and still hold the reality of God's

goodness in the other because we trust in the promise that God can and will bridge the chasm between how things are and how things will be.

Imagine thinking of joy as an act of resistance. That is the position of one of the theologians in the study. Joy is an act of resistance against the forces of despair. Think of all those forces and circumstances that strangle the gift of life. Joy looks despair and pain in the face and refuses to bow down to them. They will not become our gods. We will believe in something else and worship something else. Joy is an act of resistance against those people and forces and circumstances that would have us believe that despair and death and sorrow are the final world. We will sing a new song, the song of joy that is rooted in the goodness of God.

There are people out there, no doubt you have met some, who seem so naturally joyful. Joy comes more easily to some people than to others. We cannot force ourselves to feel joy. But we can cultivate the soil of our lives to foster joy. If we want to lead a more joyful life, we can begin by opening our eyes to the goodness of God that is already there. Intentional practices like journaling or prayer help us focus our minds on the goodness of God around us.

But perhaps one of the best ways we can cultivate joy is to find others who also want to sing that song. That is what we hope a worshipping community will do for one another. We gather to sing the Lord's song of joy in a strange land—the song of God's unshakable love, the song of God's mercy, the song of God's saving activity. Advent is a time when we raise our voices to sing a new song in this strange land. God has not forsaken us. God draws close to you and to me with saving love, with healing love, and with the power to transform. Let us rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!