

As I have been enjoying receiving Christmas cards this year, I've also noticed one I'm not receiving; my Mom's best friend, Ann, died several years back and so no card from her is coming. I specifically remember Ann's Christmas cards, because she every year she did a unique thing—she always stuck a post it note on each and every card she sent out on which she hand wrote: “don't postpone joy.” That was her motto and she lived it out so well, as she was one of the most joyful people I've ever known. “Don't postpone joy.” This morning, we and the Christian church around the world, are following her advice. We are *not* postponing joy. We are not waiting until Christmas Eve or Day, for example, to be joyful, but are even now celebrating an ancient tradition of Advent of the Church; we are celebrating this 3rd Sunday of Advent as Joy Sunday.

Let's use our imaginations for a moment and transport ourselves in time back about 1000 years, say the Year of Our Lord, 1024. Let's imagine ourselves in a different place as well, perhaps in Rome or Paris or Wittenberg. Let's imagine that we are there in that year, attending church on this Sunday, the third Sunday in Advent. We wouldn't understand the words of the service; regardless of which country we chose, the service would be in Latin. But the format of the service would actually feel quite familiar to us; our liturgy is essentially the same today, in English, as the liturgy was 1000 years ago, in Latin. When the Scripture was read, it, too, would be in Latin. But the same lessons we have before us today would be read. From the Middle Ages through the present, these are lessons for the 3rd Sunday in Advent. And there is one word that appears repeatedly in both lessons and liturgy---either in its form as a verb, “rejoice”, or as a noun, “joy”. 1000 years ago this Sunday in Advent was called Gaudete Sunday, Latin for “Joy Sunday”. So in experiencing this Sunday in Advent as Joy Sunday, we continue a tradition over 1000 years old. Some Advent wreaths have a pink candle to light on this Sunday, as does ours, to set it apart from the others. And 1000 years ago, this Joy Sunday would have stood in more stark contrast to the other Sundays of Advent, because 1000 years ago, Advent was a solemn, penitential season, much as we observe Lent today. We don't keep Advent in that solemn manner in the 21st century, which may make Joy Sunday less of a contrast. On the other hand, we've had plenty to deal with as a nation and community of a heavy, challenging, grievous nature, and so perhaps, a

Sunday focused on joy does still stand out. This morning, we focus on joy. Not temporary happiness, not forced merriment, not a passing cheerful feeling---but joy.

In keeping with our brief visit to the Middle Ages, let's ponder also briefly a chief art form of Medieval times: woven tapestries. Huge, exquisitely constructed fabric artworks were prized in churches and well-to-do homes alike. The weaving together of the threads of the tapestries were regarded as a metaphor for our lives, where many threads are woven together. Among those threads is the thread of joy....a bright thread that weaves itself through even parts of our life tapestry that may have many darker colored threads as well. Our Scripture lessons today are tied together by a thread of joy that runs through them all. Look first at our lesson from the prophet Zephaniah. We read, "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, Shout, O Isreal, Rejoice and exult with all your heart." In these verses, God's people are urged to rejoice. A few verses later we read, "The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; God will rejoice over you with gladness, God will renew you in love". Here it is God who rejoices over us.

Fast forward 6 centuries to the Magnificat, Mary's song, which we sang a few minutes ago. "My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you", Mary sang about 2000 years ago when told she would bear the Christ child, and we sing her song of joy to this day. And about 40 years after Mary sang out her joy, Paul, from prison, wrote a letter to a congregation he founded in Philippi. We read there, "Rejoice in the lord always; again, I will say "Rejoice". The oldest of these lessons were written at least 2,500 years ago, they three lessons were written within about 700 years of one another, and yet today, all this time later, we can still trace that luminescent thread of joy that connects these words to each other and to us.

So here we are this morning, surrounded by joy on Joy Sunday, and urged by Paul to "rejoice always". What do we make of this? Is Paul setting the bar too high? Are we experiencing joy? Can we trace the thread of joy within our own lives, including right now? Does it seem Paul asks too much of us? If his advice were the 1st C. equivalent of "Don't worry; be happy", he would certainly be asking too much of us. Our lives are far too complicated and nuanced to force glib happiness at a moment's notice. Fortunately, God's Word has far

greater depth than that. Paul is writing from prison, for heaven's sake---he knows that "don't worry, be happy" is trite and meaningless. Let's look more closely at this lesson to reflect on joy.

Looking at this lesson with an open mind, we recognize that Paul is advocating several very counter-cultural ideas. In a culture that lurches drunkenly between forced jollity and significant despair, Paul ask us to rejoice, to find that thread of joy---a far deeper and more lasting experience than either jollity or even despair. Furthermore, Paul asks to live a life that will stand in sharp contrast to our world if we take his advice seriously; in verse 5 he urges us, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." Our gentleness? How many of us have thought to live in such a way that the quality within us that others would remark upon would be our gentleness? Don't we hope to be known for our intelligence or our competence or our personal flair or talents? In a competitive society, is gentleness a sought-after prize? Not hardly. We may give little thought to living gently, and I'm guessing we also underestimate the impact of the gentle. We easily are seduced into thinking that it's the big things, the flash and thunderous things that shape and impact us and our world. But here's where modern psychology and Scripture share a truth---we know that it is the gentle and consistent quality of the nurturing we receive in the first 5 years of our life that make the single biggest impact upon us. 90% of brain development happens by age 5, and the quality of those early years will mark us, one way or another, for life. The greatest gift a child can be given is to be loved with gentleness and patience in those formative years. Shock and awe experiences can't possibly compete with love and gentleness in their impact over time. And honestly, even as adults---don't small, gentle gestures touch us more deeply than bombastic experiences? Isn't that where the thread of joy is found?

Think about the gentleness of Almighty God. God chooses the gentlest way possible to enter our world in Christ....he is born as a baby into a peasant family. That has to find lodging in a stable in a crowded, anxious town. Animals and humble shepherds are the only ones in attendance. It's not a bombastic entrance into the world; it's gentle, yet profoundly impactful on those involved. Jesus will continue to embody gentleness as he grows and becomes an adult. Not that He won't call out hypocrisy or injustice, He will. But He will also lift up children and bless them, preach about the beauty of lilies of the field and birds of the air, and gently touch those

considered untouchable to bring them healing and welcome. The gentleness of God in Christ is our model for gentle living, a practice that opens us to joy.

Paul goes on to recommend that we exchange prayer for worry; that we lift up our worries to God, with gratitude, rather than keeping our worries to ourselves and feeding them to grow bigger and bigger. And then he writes words about peace; he assures us that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Peace is certainly related to joy. Just as we can experience joy even amidst suffering or hardships, so we can experience peace, even amidst suffering or hardships. Remember, Paul is writing from prison! He is not in a good place in life by most standards. But He understands that even within miserable circumstances, one may be surprised by joy or sustained by God’s peace, and that’s what he wants those in Philippi to experience. God’s peace can literally be a guard for our hearts and minds, can keep us from excessive fear and worry and anxiety.

Maybe a verse of central importance in this lesson is found in verse 5, “The Lord is near.” God is with us. The Lord is near. What if that weren’t so? If there was no God, or if God was aloof from us, if the Universe were without soul or miracles and no baby was born in Bethlehem and no angels sang----if all that were so, then there would be no cause to rejoice. Then worry and brutality, rather than peace and gentleness, would be our reality. But, as Christians, we absolutely deny all of those “ifs”. The Lord is near. There is a God, a God who loves us and is with us. The Universe has a soul, miracles happen, a baby is born in Bethlehem, angels still sing, and that’s why we can trace the thread of joy that makes all the difference in our lives. “The Lord is near.”

So, joy is a treasure; it is a gift from God. Much in this world robs us of joy and steals our joy away. But God wants us to be joyful, God wants us to experience peace and gentleness and joy. Which is why we should be alert for joy, ready to recognize and welcome it into our souls. That’s why my Mom’s friend, Ann, was so wise and wonderful when she lived with that motto---Don’t postpone joy. Our community has suffered some hard losses this year; we have grieved. Some are fighting serious illnesses; there is struggle. Our griefs and struggles are real, but they don’t negate joy. And as proof that, I can offer up last weekend’s Julebyen,

which was put on solely by volunteers from this community and church, the same people who have had their share of griefs and struggles. But the thread of joy throughout last weekend was so evident and powerful.

On Saturday, our daughter and son-in-law came up to go to the Julebyen with us. All of us loved it! And being able to share the experience with that next generation down gave us joy. And of course, as many of you with far more generations at hand know, the Julebyen is all about families and generations and young and old having fun together, having shared experiences of tradition and wonder together. Seeing grandparents and grandchildren working together in the craft building, seeing families get on the troll train with the children besides themselves with anticipation, seeing older ones pass on tips for making traditional lefse or krumkake to younger ones, all bring joy.

Then there was the Live Nativity on Sunday, put on specifically by our congregation. What an amazing event that was! Many people told me the highlight of the entire weekend was seeing the camels being bottle fed or children interacting with the goats----not high tech stuff, not loud and flashy, just delightful and wondrous, being a part of that thread of joy. To say nothing of the Live Nativity story, music, and witness, all of which were significantly joyful.

Maybe to me the overwhelming joy about Julebyen is the overwhelming sense of good will that permeates the event from top to bottom and every-which-way possible. People were filled with joy there; you could see it in their faces. And joy lingers.....the experience will be a part of the thread of joy that weaves through their Advent and Christmas, a gift from God and a gift we were privileged to play a part in. Don't postpone joy. Recognize it, welcome it in. The Lord is near. There is reason to rejoice. Amen.