

Summary:

“Repeat the Sounding Joy: Loving Joy,” the second in our series for Advent, “Heaven and Nature Sing,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, December 8, 2019

Detail:

As I prepared the message for today I kept thinking to myself that these two passages would have worked equally well on Cantata Sunday because the poetry from the Isaiah reading and the cries of John the Baptist lend themselves well to a focus on the power of music and singing. Something powerful happens when we raise our voices together, even for those who participate by simply listening. Song is created by breath and by vibrating sounds waves; the music literally passes from one body to another, resonating within each person, joining them together in the shared experience of song.

What a delightful way to celebrate and remember

loving joy, to feel it run through our very being.

Part of what makes music effective is the way it uses repetition and surprise. Think, for example, of the song which is the focus of our worship series, *Joy to the World*. The repetition found in the first verse, “and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing...” is the title of our Advent series. The repetition of the second verse, “repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy...” is part of the title of our message this week.

With this week’s them being *love*, we could easily have used verse four’s repetition of “and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love.”

Music often relies on a refrain— a memorable phrase and melody that occurs over and over again, usually at the end of a verse - and that encapsulates the greater theme of the song.

So my question for you on this second Sunday in Advent is: What will be **our** refrain this Advent season? What melody do **we** want to sing out to the world over and over again?

Our scriptures today remind us of the radical and unexpected or surprising ways God's love shows up. In Isaiah we read about a shoot coming from a stump. Life popping up in or perhaps clinging to something perceived as dead. One of the daily posts on our church Facebook page this week depicted a flower growing out of the crack in a brick wall. At the beginning of his book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, forester and author Peter Wohlleben describes coming across a group of what he describes as mossy stones in the forest. Intrigued by their unusual shape, he bent down to take a closer look, and upon inspection realized these "stones" were alive and rooted in the ground; they were green and could not be moved. Stepping back, he noticed the "stones" form a pattern and realized that what he had stumbled upon were the gnarled remains of an enormous ancient tree stump. Nature has a way of showing us what it looks like to hold fast to life and love and joy. We see living stones or shoots coming from a stump and something about it resonates in our soul. God is at work here. New life is emerging here. Death and resurrection.

Rev. Barbara Lundblad, in her commentary on Isaiah, notes the surprise, the unexpectedness in the vision the prophet sees,

"A shoot growing from the stump of Jesse, the gifts of the spirit, the peaceable kingdom where predators and their prey live side by side, and babies play unharmed near poisonous snakes." This is the

proleptic vision that we talked about last week - the vision, the hope from God's preferred future. Woody Allen once gave his own interpretation of this vision: 'The wolf shall lie down with the lamb. But the lamb won't get much sleep!'"

But before we get to this promised vision in Isaiah, the people must understand: the stump is dead.

God had said it would be so. Just before this chapter,

God declares punishment on the people: "the tallest trees will be cut down and the lofty will be brought low."

The trees, the people -- both will be clean cut off.

The two nations, Judah and Israel, will be no more.

Their conquerors, first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, will clear cut the nations; exile awaits them.

And yet, another word comes from the very same prophet: "*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,*" that is, from the lineage of their great king, David. There is hope. There is always hope. God always provides for hope even when the days seem to be their darkest, even when the season is at its bleakest.

Lundblad shares three stories, three images, of how new life, new hope, appeared to her: a nature image; a human image; and then a communal image. Construction began in her New York neighborhood on a new police station.

“Manhattan,” she says, “is a mighty rock. Such rock does not give in easily. I watched as huge jackhammers crashed down on the rock making barely a dent, until cracks finally appeared on the surface.

“This same rock runs through the park near our church -- rocks that make a mockery of jackhammers. Yet, I have seen something else along the path: a tiny seedling pushing out into the sunlight. A tender shoot no bigger than my finger had broken through the rock without a jackhammer. There are, I know, scientific explanations why such a thing is possible, yet each time I saw it, that stubborn shoot appeared to me a miracle.”

A miracle she calls it. New life emerging from a place where no life should be.

Her second story involves a man on her street that she's known for years. “We often met in the morning at the newsstand,” she writes. “Then, his wife died -- forty-two years together changed to loneliness. I watched him walking, his head bowed, his shoulders drooping lower each day. His whole body seemed in mourning, *cut off* from everyone.

“I grew accustomed to saying, ‘Good morning’ without any response. Until a week ago. I saw him coming and before I could get any words out, he tipped his hat, ‘Good morning, Reverend. Going for your paper?’ He walked beside me, eager to talk. I could not know what brought the change that seemed so sudden. Perhaps, for him, it wasn't sudden at all, but painfully slow.

Like a seedling pushing through rock toward the sunlight. There must have been an explanation, yet he appeared to me, a miracle.”

Lundblad then shares a third story that helps us own this story, this text, this image or vision at the community or communal level. And she bears down gently on some of our biases, our prejudices, in writing,

“We often decide too soon where things can’t grow. ‘Surely not there!’ we say. The rock is too hard, the stump too dead. There are times when we assume whole groups of people cannot grow or thrive. Across from Manhattan, Jersey City clings to the river's edge. My friend Ruth grew up there in the thirties. She said it wasn't so bad being a black person in those years.

If you were light enough and straightened your hair, you could get a good job with the telephone company.

“That’s exactly what her mother did. Every Saturday afternoon as soon as the weather was warm, Ruth and her mother Mabel got all dressed up, fit for the finest party in town. But they didn't even go out the door. They put two chairs out on the fire escape and left the window open wide with the radio tuned to ‘Saturday Afternoon at the Metropolitan Opera.’ They sat for the rest of the afternoon, listening to the opera not from the first balcony but from the fire escape. Mabel knew most of the arias by heart and sang along with her favorites.

“One day she overheard some white folks at the phone company say that black people just couldn't understand opera. She would tell that story and laugh until the tears rolled down her cheeks. And she surely was pleased when the great Marian Anderson was invited to sing at the Lincoln Memorial.

People didn't expect much to grow in that part of Jersey City. But hope can be stubborn. You can try to keep people down, you can put all kinds of obstacles in their way, and yet, they push through the sidewalk. They break through the rock where jackhammers failed and sing in the sunlight for all

in the streets below to hear."

God's vision of the future, God's hope for the present, God's love for creation shows up in some of the darnedest places. In Matthew today, we read about John the Baptist. John is like the weed growing in the midst of the rock - we're surprised by him, by his presence. In his own peculiar way, this character sings of the radical love of God in Jesus. He calls out in the wilderness saying, "God is at work here. New life is emerging here."

And as last week with Holy Communion, we are reminded today of the rituals that give us hope, this time in the ritual of baptism, the waters by which we have life. As we shared as a community in the baptism today of these two beloved children of God we are reminded of *our own* baptism, of *our own* covenant, of the promise of new life made both *to us* and *through us* and God's community in this place.

John's seemingly harsh message may be hard for some to hear and may seem to contradict this week's emphasis on loving joy. But if we consider it this way — this man in the wilderness is crying out for the people and standing with them in the waters of baptism, for the sake of their salvation—we might sense a deep, loving joy this disciple had for the people of God. In baptism, in song, in nature we grow in love and grow toward love.

God's Advent word comes to sit with us where we are. John's vision seems harsh, but it's born from love. Isaiah's vision is surprising, but small. The nation would never rise again.

The shoot would not become a mighty cedar. The shoot that was growing would be different from what the people expected.

Later, in chapter 53 the prophet writes these words:

*For he grew up before them like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (Isa. 53: 2)*

The promised Messiah would not look like what they expected. *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...* fragile yet tenacious and stubborn. It would grow like a plant out of rock-hard ground. It would push back the stone of a rock-hard tomb.

As Lundblad offered, it will grow in the heart of a man cut off by sorrow until one morning he can look up again. It will grow in the hearts of people told over and over that they are nothing, that they're not capable. The plant will grow. It will break through the places where jackhammers failed. It will sing on the fire escape and soar from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

It will be heard in songs and in silence.

It will be seen in laughter and in tears.

It will be known in cities and in forests.

It will be felt in love and in joy.

I shared last week that one of my texts for this series is *The Book of Joy*, by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. In that book, Archbishop Tutu writes about the concept of “Ubuntu,” that a person is only a person through other persons. And he says,

“Ubuntu says when I have a small piece of bread, it is for my benefit that I share it with you. Because, after all, none of us came into the world on our own. We needed two people to bring us into the world. And the Bible that we Jews and Christians share tells a beautiful story. God says, ‘It is not good for Adam to be alone.’ Well, you could have said, ‘No, I’m sorry, he’s not alone. I mean there are trees, there are animals, and there are the birds. How can you say he’s alone?’

“And you realize that in a very real sense we’re meant for a very profound complementarity. It is the nature of things...I could not speak as I am speaking without having learned it from other human beings. I could not walk as a human being, I could not think as a human being, except through learning it from other human beings. I learned to be a human being from other human beings. We belong to this delicate network. It is actually quite profound.

“Unfortunately, in our world we tend to be blind to our connection until times of great disaster [when] we find we start caring about people in Timbuktu, whom we’ve never met and we’re probably not going to meet this side of death. And yet we pour out our hearts. We give resources to help them because we realize that we are bound up together. We are bound up and can be human only together.” - Archbishop Tutu, *The Book of Joy*, 60.

“We can only be human together,” he says. That kind of flies in the face of our idea of our independence, of our being “self-made,” doesn’t it? True joy is not something we can pursue on it’s own - it’s

something that comes as a result of being who we are created to be, of recognizing and living into ubuntu, of living into relationship and community, into the “altogether love” that our Advent study tells us about, and the generosity and compassion that comes with caring for others in the community just as we are cared for by others in the community.

But communities take all kinds of shapes and forms don't they? My good friend and colleague John Girard made this point by use of an allegory:

Have any of you ever been to the Redwood National Park, or seen a redwood tree? They're said to be the tallest living species on Earth. They can exceed 300 feet in height, and can be 44 feet around at its base. Trees this big, one would expect, would have huge roots underground, supporting and stabilizing them, right?

But in fact, redwood roots are very shallow, growing only 4-6 feet deep. This isn't much support for a tree that grows 300 feet high and more than 40 feet around, is it?

A redwood's roots don't grow deep, but they do spread out – as far as 125 feet out. And redwoods never grow alone. Redwoods only grow in groves, or communities, so that as each tree's roots grow outward, they interlock with those of its neighbor, to form a network, or family, of roots. It's as though they're holding hands underground, forming a web of roots that allows the trees to withstand even the greatest of storms. They must grow with other redwoods - they must be in community.

Now, I'll ask you to turn and look at all of these who are gathered here with you today - those seated beside you, behind you, in front of you. Look at their faces, look into their eyes. If you would be so bold, reach out and squeeze their hands. These are your redwoods - this is your grove, your family of roots. These are who God has provided for you to interlock with, to hold hands with, when the seasons of life get testy and when the winds blow hard. As fragile as some may look, as young as some may be, like you, God has a plan for them.

As another prophet wrote, *I know the plans I have...for you says the Lord; ...plans for peace, not for disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. (Jer. 29:11, CEB)*

So on this second week of Advent, when we celebrate God's Loving Joy, what if we step out in faith and believe that this fragile sign, this shoot growing from what we thought a dead stump, is the beginning of God's hope for us, God's plan for us - as individuals...as families...as a congregation...as a denomination?

What if this wild voice crying in the wilderness, waist deep in the water of baptism, rather than calling to us from a place of judgment is calling to us from a place of love? If we can imagine that, then perhaps then we'll tend the seedling that God has planted in our hearts, the place where faith longs to break through the rock hardness of our disbelief. Don't wait til the tree is full grown. God comes to us in this Advent time and invites us to move beyond counting the rings in the stumps of the past. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while, and God will sit with us. And as we sit there, our eyes will be opened to the roots, some mossy and appearing as stones, others tightly woven together like a net, a network even. And as we see these things, God will keep nudging us: "Look! Look -- there on that dead stump. Do you see that green shoot growing up? That's how much I love you!"

That's how much God loves us! That even in the midst of the darkness that seems to permeate all aspects of life some times, God is with us - Emmanuel - bringing shoots of new life and loving joy into places we thought too sad, too hard, too rocky, too inadequate, too dead.

So may you allow, even invite and welcome God's gift of loving joy to be your song, to be your refrain this season. And let us together repeat that sounding joy! Amen.