

Advent, Day 15—December 15, 2024

Rejoice!

Yes, I have to include the exclamation point with that joyful imperative! The third Sunday of Advent is known as *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for...you guessed it! Rejoice! This day carries this special significance because we are deep into a weighty, reflective holy season, and it is important to take time to revel in joy. After all, Christ is coming! For many of us, it feels like there is always more to get done, more to consume our time and energy, more to wear us down. When we feel that way, we must press pause and remember to rejoice! We must remember that God created us with delight and that God wants us to experience all the best of Creation.

God wanted this so profoundly for us that God became incarnate as a human being to learn more about what was necessary for us to experience all the best and to do something about it. God experienced firsthand the brokenness of the world that breaks so many humans, and God chose to transform it all through a Kingdom of peace, justice, equity, and, above all, love! God chose to transform the very power of death, to give the promise of the best life we can live on this earth if we live according to that Kingdom, and then the promise of new life in the Resurrection. This is our God! As followers of this God, we must seek to do all that we can to heal the brokenness of this world, to lift the heaviness off of the shoulders of the suffering so that all may rejoice with gusto. Rejoice!

The liturgical color of Gaudete Sunday is rose, a particularly beautiful color from nature. It always makes me think of the lovely Advent song, “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” which depicts Jesus as a rose blooming in winter.

“Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As those of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.”

So, Jesus is a burst of life and color in the harshest time, a source of life and color for all of us, a brilliant reason for rejoicing! Hallelujah!

Push pause. Rejoice!

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!”—Philippians 4:4

Advent, Day 16—December 16, 2024

Joy

Yesterday we rejoiced and lit the rose candle for joy. I think of joy as a phenomenon that lives as part of our essence, part of the image of God that is always inside of us. It is not always easily accessible, but it is always ready for us when we are ready to open ourselves up to it. It is thus different from other feelings of pleasure that depend on external factors. I am convinced that joy is available to us even in the hardest situations of grief and suffering. It can exist alongside those hard things. It can keep us alive in the midst of those hard things. It may not always be a bursting spring of jumping and dancing (though sometimes it is!), but even if it is a quiet stream flowing somewhere deep within us it can sustain us. God's gifts to creation are the keys to accessing that life-giving flow of joy, and yesterday I was reminded that the gift of music is one of the most effective keys. First, we had our Christmas cantata during worship. There is nothing like a group of people coming together to create beautiful music for the glory of God! In that moment, I know that we singers and the listeners experienced the transcendent nature of joy. Then, a group of us went caroling, visiting some of our beloved members who are unable to come to church in person anymore. Across the board they are going through very difficult adjustments and transitions at this stage in life. When we started singing, though, there was an experience of mutual joy. We started smiling and singing, and our home-bound loved ones started smiling and singing right along with us. Joy was flowing back and forth!

There are other gifts from God that help us to access joy—natural landscapes and seascapes and skyscapes, visual artwork, the capacity of our brains for memories, delicious food, time spent with children, opportunities to build justice and weave peace, acts of kindness that remind us of goodness, and the list goes on.

Whatever helps you to access that flow of joy right now, I hope that you will make use of it even if you are going through a hard time. I hope that you will also reach out to others with your joy! We all need it!

“O come, let us sing to the Lord;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!”—Psalm 95:1-2

Advent, Day 17—December 17, 2024

Grief

I contended yesterday, and I always contend, that joy and grief can coexist. In truth, I think it is something more profound than coexistence. I think that joy is part of grief. Grief is our emotional experience of loss, and it is a complicated tangle of shock, consternation, sorrow, anger, numbness, loneliness, and...joy? Yes, it is there in that tangle. Moving with the flow of water from yesterday, it may be a barely detectable trickle for a long time, but it is there. For, grief is all about love, and love inherently flows with joy. There is joy in the depths of our beings for the knowledge that such love ever existed in the first place. There is joy in the memories that we share. There is joy in the promise of the resurrection and thus of the reunion to come. There is joy in the awareness that our loved ones are in the direct presence of the glory of God. None of that minimizes the shock, consternation, sorrow, anger, numbness, and loneliness, but the joy is there as part of all of it.

I heard late last night and received confirmation today that a dear friend from my seminary days died. The news came as a shock, and I am still experiencing that shock. I was not in recent contact with him, but he was somebody who left an indelible imprint on my life and the lives of many. In the midst of my shock and sorrow, memories are flooding through me. And in the midst of those memories, there is undeniable joy. I cherish those memories, and I cherish that joy. Advent and Christmas are times of particularly acute grief for many. As we go through this season, may we open ourselves up to the joy that comes with that grief!

“Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.”—*Psalms* 30:5b

Advent, Day 18—December 18, 2024

Wonder

There is so much cause for wonder in our lives, from the most magnificent of macro natural phenomena to microscopic biology to the development of children to the exquisite complexity of our emotions to our capacity for imagination, hope, and love. I can't help but connect wonder to joy. Whenever I experience wonder, joy is there. I wonder if that is so because experiences of wonder are truly experiences of God's presence in Creation and in our lives. When I see the colors of the sunset and gaze at a sky full of stars, when I feel sand between my toes and breeze upon

my skin, when I hear voices touched by the divine and new words coming out of babies' mouths, when I smell miracles of the kitchen and scents of trees, when I spend time with my grandmothers and when I spend time with my little sisters, when I encounter community in different contexts and when I feel community come alive in my context, when I connect naturally and profoundly with someone expected and when I contemplate the eternal, I experience God.

Wonder takes us by surprise. I like to think of it as the Holy Spirit beckoning us away from the often limited scope and grind of daily life, inviting us into marvel and beauty and pleasure and...joy! We have to choose to accept the invitation, though. We have to take those moments to pause and behold, to open our senses, to feel. For, God is always there wherever we may be. There is thus always cause for wonder. What is your cause for wonder right now?

“Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with wonder, saying, ‘We have seen incredible things today.’”—Luke 5:26

Advent, Day 19—December 19, 2024

Creation

Yesterday I wrote about wonder, including wonder at the magnificence of God's Creation. When I think of God's acts of Creation, I cannot help but feel wonder and joy. I cannot help but imagine God's joy in creating everything from the building blocks of matter to the macro-scapes sculpted from that matter. I cannot help but imagine God's joy in playing with light and darkness and painting with the entire spectrum of color. I cannot help but imagine God's joy in piecing together and animating marvels of celestial and biological mechanics. I cannot help but imagine God's joy in breathing life into being!

Creation is inherently joyful, and we ourselves are blessed with the God-given and God-inspired ability to create. I feel it whenever I write and feel the Spirit flowing in playful and interesting ways. I feel it whenever I join others in making music. I feel it whenever I stretch myself and allow myself to draw, color, paint, or sculpt. I feel it whenever I play with children and enter imaginary worlds. And I feel it whenever I experience the wonder of others' creations, whenever I experience the power and beauty of what God's children are capable of when energy is directed towards creation rather than destruction.

During Advent we look for the incarnation of the Creator. The Creator in the flesh was particularly adept at creating community, new ways of healing, new ways of

wonder working, new ways of living, and, of course, wine! May we be particularly active in creating as we await the coming Creator!

“In the beginning, God began to create...” *Genesis 1:1*

Advent, Day 20—December 20, 2024

Fun

We cannot go a week of exploring joy without embracing fun! God wants us to enjoy life and fills us with the capacity and desire for pleasure in play, humor, and thrills. Fun must be another one of those divine imprints, for I am certain that God had fun when creating the universes. I picture Creator, Word, and Holy Spirit dancing and playing in primordial existence and then joyfully ushering everything else into existence. That’s not exactly explicitly there in the scriptures, but it is fun to imagine the family of our Triune God having fun! I am certain that Jesus had fun on earth as well, even with the weight of the world bearing down on him. Otherwise he could not have survived until the end (and new beginning!). For, fun is a powerful tool of survival. And then it is necessary for living and thriving. Jesus surely had fun escaping his parents at the temple as a child. Jesus surely had fun with his friends the disciples. And Jesus most assuredly had fun with the children who played around him, whom he made a point to exalt!

Speaking of children, the truest embodiment of our own call as disciples during this season and always would be to strive for a world in which all children get to have fun while still children and then to grow up having fun. Fun is the zest of life, and that zest is all too often robbed by the harm, grief, and fear caused by us adults. Such is the case in Gaza and Sudan. Such is the case in schools and homes across this country. We are responsible for the weapons and the wars. I wonder how the world would change if we adults would make our decisions based on the impact on children’s ability to have fun! I wonder how the world would change if we all would allow ourselves to loosen up more and lighten up more and liven up more with fun!

“Go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart...”—
Ecclesiastes 9:7a

Advent, Day 21—December 21, 2024

Excitement

We’re almost there! In four short days we will be celebrating the Incarnation of the

Word, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth to Mary! I know that the holidays elicit a lot of complicated feelings for a lot of people, but I hope that excitement for Christmas is one of them. Even in my late thirties, I still get excited about waking up on Christmas morning, feasting on waffles with family and friends, and sitting around the Christmas tree filled with warmth. My excitement is certainly fed by the excitement of my young siblings, but much of it comes from my persistent inner child. I feel very similar excitement about our church's Christmas Eve, with the best story ever told being read aloud and beloved carols being sung with gusto and drippy candles being held aloft. I always feel the Holy Spirit deep in my soul when in the milieu of collective somberness and anticipation of people focused on the reason for the season.

Deeper down, this is excitement about the fulfillment of God's Word, the promise of the Incarnation. It is excitement about the possibilities sparked by the transformative way of living that Jesus ignited, even thousands of years later. It is excitement about future incarnations of God's presence in the world. It is excitement about the new heaven and the new earth. These things may not always be top of mind in the face of all the sensory joy of the season, but that sensory joy is itself a manifestation, an incarnation of these things!

It may sometimes feel like betrayal to experience excitement and joy when there is so much brokenness in the world, but I encourage all of us to reflect on these deeper-down things of Incarnation and to remember that it is revolutionary to bring them to fruition. Our excitement and joy should accompany our actions of transformation. Our excitement and joy should spark transformation in others. Imagine the power of it spreading!

"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."—*Luke 21:28*