

Third Sunday of Advent, 13 December 2020
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
James Knutsen

[3 Advent B: Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-9,19-28]

It's the darkest time of the year, and today we hear of light.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

For many, this is typically a sad, difficult, lonely time of the year, and this year so much has conspired and converged to make it sadder, lonelier, more difficult than usual. For us in this country, it is a time of social, economic and political crisis not seen in our lifetimes. On facebook I saw, and shared, a photo of one of those big celebratory J-O-Y figures that people put up in their yards, but the J had fallen over, leaving OY, which seems perhaps a more on-target word this year, and this month, as Covid rages and deaths surpass what was supposed to be the worst, last spring. We are needing to quarantine, isolate, lockdown, and in what feels the worst and most painful time of the year for it. The vaccine, thank God, is on the verge of distribution, but in limited quantities and not without rancor about who should be first, second, third in line. The pandemic is far from over.

And while there is much relief at a peaceful and secure election, a sizeable and vocal minority of Americans—including many elected officials and some media outlets—is evidently determined to carry forward a “stabbed in the back” story of a stolen election, and so deepening division, suspicion, threats, and resentment at a time when we desperately need to come together, work together, heal together, *be* together.

Oy, indeed. Oy, oy, oy!

How are you feeling through all of this? How are you? How are your family, friends, loved ones? Is it more joy, or oy?

And yet, more than anything, our lessons today are about—yes—joy, about rejoicing.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God, we hear from Isaiah. *Rejoice always,* says Paul.

And indeed, today, the Third Sunday of Advent, is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday, *gaudete* being, in Latin, the second person plural present active imperative of the verb *gaudeo*, rejoice, which is to say, *rejoice, y'all, now!*

But what if you're just not feeling it?

It's worth remembering that these texts that are collected in Bible, in the vast majority of cases and as far as we can tell, didn't come to be in times of ease and prosperity and peace. Virtually every book of the Bible bears the marks of crisis, of suffering, of conflict, of oppression or persecution. When these oracles, these letters, these poems and hymns and proverbs and stories took shape, took on the task of inspiring hope, inspiring trust, inspiring joy, it was understood that this was about digging deep, about a *struggle* and a *responsibility* to keep uncovering the wellsprings of hope and trust and joy in the midst of suffering, oppression, exile, conflict, and disaster.

At least, so it seems to me. Steeped in our present culture, it's easy for so many of us to hear these calls to rejoice as a prompt to dismiss our sadness, and pretend we're happy. Well, fake it till you make it may have its place, but I don't think that's what this is about.

Just the other day in the car I tuned in toward the end of a conversation on KQED forum in which the host Mina Kim and her guest were talking about how many people have, in the midst of the Covid crisis, and because of it, found deep resources of

meaning and joy within themselves and in their relationships in the midst of so much tragedy and inconvenience.

Has that perhaps been at least somewhat the case for you?

What I heard in that conversation was the experience that the joy doesn't come from pushing away the sorrow, but actually through allowing ourselves to experience it fully and deeply. Covid has hit different people, different populations, different households, so differently. But for those of us for whom it has mostly meant staying at home and doing less, this has meant slowing down, and in this slowing down I think many of us have been able to actually feel more of what we are feeling, and that has opened up a space to feel more of what others are feeling.

I think that for so many, the Black Lives Matter protests after the murder of George Floyd caught us at a time when, despite the stresses of Covid, we were actually more emotionally and cognitively available. We somehow had more bandwidth to feel what these people were feeling, and as a result there was what amounts to a conversion among many white Americans.

We became more able to see and hear and feel and understand what so many of our fellow human beings have been going through for a very, very long time.

I don't know. What was that all like for you?

Going down into the sorrow and the grief, really feeling it, can make us more alive, and more *available* for compassion, for hope, and even, yes, for joy! When I heard that segment on the radio I thought of a passage from John Climacus, a monk and abbot at the Monastery on Mount Sinai in the seventh century. He wrote:

*I am amazed at how that which is called mourning and grief should contain joy and gladness interwoven within it, like honey in the comb.*¹

¹ Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Revised Edition (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2001), 76.

We inhabit a culture that is pathologically avoidant of sorrow. If you are in the midst of deep grief, there's pretty much no place for you in our society and culture. Sorrow doesn't sell stuff, so it's pushed away. But in this avoidance of grief, our own and others, we are cut off from ourselves and one another, cut off from reality, and cut off from actual joy.

When we hear Paul today say "Rejoice always!", it's worth noting that in another place he writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."² So this is not about pretending everything is OK, so as not to be a burden. This is about being fully present to ourselves and to one another, and becoming more and more present to the presence of God.

In the midst of our current sorrow and darkness, feeling the pain, the loss, the loneliness that we ourselves and so many are experiencing is in fact the way through, the gateway to joy.

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There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Picture yourself in the darkness. You sit in the darkness, and look into the darkness, and feel the darkness. And then you notice that it's not actually completely pitch black, but more of a deep gray. And then you notice that it's not a uniform, monotonous deep gray, that actually there are little specks of light punctuating the darkness. And then you notice that the more you look at one of these tiny specks of light, the brighter it becomes; and the brighter it becomes, the bigger and more dazzling it becomes, and all those specks of light grow and merge until you are in a field of light with little specks of darkness.

It's the same place, the same reality, the same world, but through sitting in the darkness and attending to the light, *you* have changed, the light has seeped into you, and the darkness, while still

² Romans 12:15

there, still real, has receded, and you can see the darkness in a field of light. As you are dazzled by the light, you remember that it began by looking into the darkness. That's where the light of Christ appears.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

I take this to mean that the light is for everyone. No one is to be excluded. I also take it to mean that, somehow, somewhere, the light is already present within everyone, within everyone and everything, just by virtue of being created. The light of Christ rhymes with the light of creation, *is* the light of creation, appearing among us, welcoming us into its fullness.

A closely related text, the First Letter of John, says this:

Here is the message that we have heard from him and pass on to you, that God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.³

God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all

There is no final destiny for any one of us except the light. There is no final destiny for creation except the light.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

No darkness at all. Can I explain the darkness? No, not really.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

It's such a resonant verse, and easy to memorize, too. Perhaps you'll want to memorize it and repeat and ponder it in the week ahead: *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

³ 1 John 1:5