

SCRIPTURE: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. 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. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

SERMON: “Joy” The Rev. Brent Damrow

Among the greatest of all joys we experience as people is the birth of a child. After all, this whole season is leading up to this great and glorious gift of God, found in the most unexpected of ways, that gift of newness, that gift of possibility, that gift of innocence and hope and peace and joy and love wrapped up all in one. We know this truth about the joy coming forth from a baby, not just from this story and how much time we spend getting ready for Christmas. But we know it from the collective way we as church live throughout the year.

I love that you text in your joys and concerns, because I can see your faces as you do it. And if you haven't yet texted them in for today, do it now. It is in those prayers of joys and concerns that we lift up the fullness of our lives. And I've got to tell you this: Whenever a new baby is born, that is the first prayer always offered. And I've got to tell you this: I miss Jane McCormick and her wonderful spirit in this room. For whenever there is a new birth in her family, I am not even done asking are there any joys before her hand has shot up to the balcony, wanting to share with everybody the great news of joy that has come. And Jane is not alone. Your faces sparkle at the birth day of little ones.

Birthdays are critical. They are critical in the days of the life of the church – think Christmas, think Pentecost. But they're also critical in our individual lives, too. I wonder this morning if there is a birthday that carried particular joy for you. Is there a celebration, whether of your own or someone else's, that really captured the essence of joy. I want you to think about that for just a moment.

For me, there is no doubt and no question. And while my husband is working on streaming this service, I hope he can actually hear this, because it really came about because of a herculean and thoughtful effort on his part. It was my 40th birthday, sometimes one of those birthdays that are reserved for the lament of getting older, of passing out of youth. And yet Jon threw a birthday I will never forget, and because of all the ingredients involved. It was in Camden, a place of such great meaning for me and for our relationship. It is where we got engaged, after all. To that place, he brought various people from various parts of my life to spend a weekend together. The menu for that night was all based on a food I love, a love I inherited from my dad, that is the love of chocolate. Everything chocolate. Think fountains of chocolate. Think mole. Think cake. Think martinis. If you could make it with chocolate, he did. He collected a soundtrack for me, asking friends and family to remember the songs that they either associate with me from the past or the present. And I've got to tell you, some of them were downright embarrassing, and yet a source of joy.

I will even be bold enough to share with you two of them. One, Debbie Boone singing You Light Up My Life. Yeah, that was me as a kid. Yep. The other, Islands in the Stream sung by Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers. Right? My dad can remember hearing it upstairs in the house, me jamming to it, because that's what kids like me do, we jam to Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers. But in the midst of what might have been embarrassing, the joy for being seen for who I was. Then, there was a champagne toast on top of a frigid mountain in December. It was so cold that by the time we got down, the little bit of champagne left in the bottle was frozen. And yet it was a time of absolute joy. The reason it was joy, the reason it lingers, is because it wasn't in the absence of the difficulties of life. There were people with us who were struggling mightily. And yet it was in the fullness of who we are together that made it work.

Desmond Tutu would say that he would hope that that kind of joy would show up every day for us. That kind of intentionality about remembering where we've been and who we've journeyed with. That kind of remembrance that we are in this together. That kind of lifting of joy for what has been and what will yet be. That they would happen every day, even if not on that scale, because Desmond Tutu would remind us that ever single day is in fact a celebration of our birth. Yet, being in that place of joy even in the midst of everything the world can throw at us is not always easy, and I wonder if you were paying attention to our slide show this morning. I wonder if that is why so often the form of joy in the Bible and in all the passages doesn't come so much in a noun, but rather in its verbal form. Rejoice! Dwell in it, practice it, live it, because you will need it to face the world.

Each week in Advent, we have made that intentional decision to focus on the theme of the week, the word for the week. How the word is used, where it comes from, what might have been glossed over in its full meaning, and what we need to remember today. I don't know if you looked back at the videos, but it's highly likely that each week I've said that this is the most important word for Advent. Because each week it has been true.

In week 1, Hope – oh my goodness, how much do we need that anchor of hope in these critical times, where so much is in flux, there's so much possibility and yet so much pain. Hold onto that hope. Only to find, I know, in week 2, I maybe landed in Maya Angelou's camp, to say that what the world really needs most right now is Peace. And then, this week. I would say Joy is what we absolutely need. I heard one of our musicians this week practicing Joy to the World, that song we get to hear once a year. And it was like, oh, amen, we need that so much. But I promise you, if you come back next week, I will make that same claim about the word for next week, the word Jake has already tipped you off to.

If you look at joy in the Bible, it is that innate, communal, natural outpouring of celebration that comes from two realities. From one reality that has already happened, and the other that is still happening in this very moment. The experience of deliverance in the midst of the promise of fuller salvation. Both as we yet breathe and when we stop breathing. For the people of faith in the Bible knew what it was like to struggle. They knew what it was like to be in the midst of the pain, and yet they knew how to celebrate. They knew how to find joy.

Joy, maybe unlike happiness, is definitely available to each of us separately, and yet, it finds, I believe, its fullest expression together when we are gathered. That's one of the hardest things of

this pandemic, isn't it, that joy is nurtured in communal celebration? Joy, make no mistake, has that inward marking, a personal manifestation, a spark we feel in here, something that is untouchable by the world. And yet, especially for someone like Paul in our passage this morning, it blossoms when we come together in celebration. Rejoice always is in the plural. All of you rejoice together, all y'all together. Music and dancing until the joy of that dance takes over.

In Hebrew scripture, the celebrations were legendary. David, in fact, commanded the Levites to make a joyful noise to the accompaniment of thousands of instruments. For to remember God's deliverance was no small feat. David, you might not remember, when he brought the ark of the covenant back to the Temple, it was such a joyous event that he ended up half naked by the time they got to the Temple. All the vestments of kingship thrown aside, dancing merely in an ephod to the chagrin of some and the great joy, I think, of God and all the people gathered. For in the midst of the presence of God and the people, let it ride. Finally, when David's son Solomon was anointed as king, the first book of Kings reports that the celebration of the people was so loud, the acclaim was so great, the presence of the Spirit was so possible, that in the midst of it do you know what happened? The earth itself was split from all of the noise.

You see, celebrations in Hebrew times were that great because they knew suffering. Celebration and suffering always dance as partners in the Bible. Think of Paul's letter about the Body. We are called to be with one another when we suffer, and then to dance in celebration. Remember, in Ecclesiastes, there is a time to mourn and a time to dance. They belong together. They do not make the claim that one is absent from the other. Unlike happiness, you can be miserable and joyful at the same time. In fact, that is the most important time to be.

These celebrations of great feasts would take place even in times when the whole world was coming apart, even when there were things of great worry out there. But yet they were reminders that right now and with this breath, we find joy. It is the same thing that happens when we gather around Christ's table. That in the midst of everything in life, we come to a celebration. Even if it's a bit more subdued in our church than frolicking and dance so loud that clothes might come off or the earth might split open. In Psalm 16 is the great cry, in the midst of difficulty, mind you, that Your presence, O God, fills me with joy. In the Bible, faith and joy, love and sorrow, they always go hand in hand.

Joy. It will be joy that you will hear on Christmas Eve, when the angels bring good tidings of great joy. It is joy that frames not just this season but hopefully all the seasons of our lives. And for Paul, it is joy when we gather together that is most important, because joy is not an end or a static thing, but rather it invites us into more fullness of being a disciple. When Paul writes about joy in the letters, and especially here in Thessalonians, it is about the joy of how they figured it out together, and how their lives are changing and manifesting this inner peace, even in times when they are being greatly persecuted.

In preparation for today's sermon, I explored two books. And I've got to be honest, I kind of want for worship to be over so that I can go back to reading them, because I'm not done yet. The first one is "Surprised by Joy" by C.S. Lewis – absolutely amazing. And the second one is "The Gift of Joy" which focuses around another birthday celebration. You see, when Desmond Tutu wanted to surprise the Dalai Lama for his birthday, they agreed to get together for an entire week

of celebration, to simply talk about this concept of joy. Two of the greatest, most joyful, most significant theological hearts and voices of our time wanted to celebrate a birthday for a whole week in joy. I'm not going to tell you what's in those books except to tell you how they were framed. In both cases, before either got to the substance of joy and what it means and how to practice it, each of them spent significant chapters focusing on the relationship that is necessary for joy to abound. C.S. Lewis was somewhat embarrassed about the first chapters of the book, because he didn't want to talk so much about himself, but he said unless you really know me you can't understand the joy that exudes. In the introduction to "The Gift of Joy" the narrator goes into great detail about how these two men brought joy to each other, how their relationship unfolded, how Desmond Tutu got the Dalai Lama to do something his tradition says he shouldn't, and that is dance. And how the Dalai Lama brought joy to Desmond Tutu in this meeting even though prostate cancer had just reemerged in painful ways for Tutu. And how at every one of their meals, it wasn't just a meal for the two of them, but a meal for all of them. You see, joy takes place in relationship. And that is where I want to go in the end for this week.

Right now, it is hard to be together because of this pandemic. It is hard to do the gathering of Advent. And yet, practice joy. And do so by reaching out in fullness to one another, in the fullness of your relationship, in the fullness of who you are. And most of all, in the fullness of the gift that God offers. One that brings us together year after year to proclaim the greatest joy of all, the birth of a Child. And then watch as that gift manifests itself more fully and fully and fully. From an ephemeral state to an enduring trait. From a fleeting feeling, hopefully, my friends, to a lasting way of being.

Joy, Tutu claims, is our birthright. It is bigger than happiness. It is a way of being. And more importantly, it is a choice that you and I make together with every breath. May you make that choice this day and every day. Amen.