

December 12, 2021
“Joy-Full”
Isaiah 12:2-6 / Philippians 4:4-7
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

It's been kind of rough week for me. I cried a lot this week, Calvary. One of those weeks, really a couple of days earlier this week as it turned out, where I just felt completely overwhelmed. About some Calvary stuff, sure, but more about my life in general.

Riddled with self-doubt. I couldn't concentrate, I effectively shut down for the better part of a day-and-a-half. To be honest, I felt depressed in a way I haven't felt in a while – and I say that as someone who has struggled with depression for much of my adult life.

All that to say that I felt pretty far from joy this week, so perhaps it's fitting that today's Advent theme is joy. God's sense of humor at work. Or something like that. Our scripture texts this week are bursting with joy!

We hear it from the prophet Isaiah, as Theresa just read for us: “With JOY you will draw water from the wells of salvation. . . . Shout aloud and sing for JOY, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.” Sing for joy.

We hear it in the lesser known prophet, Zephaniah, as we heard John read for us in preparing to the light the Advent candle of joy: “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! REJOICE and EXULT with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! . . . The LORD, your God, is in your midst, . . . (God) will REJOICE over you with gladness . . . (and) renew you in (God's) love; (God) will EXULT over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.” Rejoice over God as God rejoices over you.

And we hear it in Paul's letter to the Philippians, his well-known refrain: “REJOICE in the Lord always; again I will say, REJOICE.” Rejoice. Always.

Liturgically speaking, what began as hope two Sundays ago now turns to joy – the joy anticipating Emmanuel, God made known to us and present among us through the

newborn Jesus, the full-grown Jesus, the resurrected Jesus. The joy anticipating, as the text from Zephaniah puts it, renewal in God's love. Joy. Joy. Joy.

But joyful is not how I would describe this past week. Truth is, I'm not a particularly joyful person in general. That's a growing edge for me. We all know people who are, or whom we experience as joyful, people who seem to exude a sense of genuine joy and gratitude most of the time. Some of them in this congregation. Some of them in my own family – I don't know how they do it, but thanks be to God! That, I think, is a spiritual gift, but for me – and perhaps for many or most of us – it feels more like a spiritual discipline.

Allow me to tell a story on myself. My wedding day – now a little more than 15 years ago in this very space, standing on this very spot across from Amy, with many of you gathered around us on a much, much warmer day – was one of the most joyful days of my life. But that's not the story.

At different points throughout the service, especially at the beginning, I found myself distracted by the fact that the wireless microphone wasn't working, and that a good number of people probably weren't gonna be able to hear my relatively soft-spoken uncle Jerry who was officiating. The same beloved uncle who died a few weeks ago.

In short, I let the perfect be the enemy of the good and so steal at least some of my joy. Not all of it, not even close, but I share that story to illustrate why, in preparing a sermon about joy, I found myself thinking, What in God's name do I know about joy?

Not much, maybe, but here's what I do know. Or at least what I think I know, what I BELIEVE about joy.

Joy is in us, deep down at the core of all of us, because joy comes from God. Joy is what's deep down at the core of the created world – it's "strewn all around" as the poet Holly J. Hughes puts it.

Joy is what emerges in us, leaps out of us, sometimes unexpectedly, when we are closest to our own and each other's belovedness. Our own and EACH OTHER's beauty. Our own and each other's giftedness. When we're able to release the sometimes,

often, thickly layered weight of the world and our lives, even for just a moment, and reconnect with ourselves and each other – including all of creation – in purest form. Clearly. Richly. Authentically. Abundantly. Think about what brings you joy and tell me it's not pure like that!

Children help keep us in touch with our joy. That's at least part of why Jesus reminds us to keep them close by. The kin-dom of God belongs to them because the joy of God in them is SO CLOSE TO THE SURFACE! They can't help it, and so their joy feeds our joy.

When I lived in Baltimore, right out of college, I remember riding the bus one morning – my almost daily, two-bus commute from southeast Baltimore where I was living, to north central Baltimore where I was working. It was crowded, but I found a seat in the back of the bus. It was a typical public transportation experience – you can picture it, right? People kept to themselves, heads down or looking out the windows, looking generally unhappy to be going wherever they were going, or at least having to do it on a bus. I could relate.

It WAS a typical public transportation experience, and then it wasn't!

I remember a woman, a mother, got on the bus with her baby in a stroller. As she paid the fare, I could see – all the way from the back of the bus – that the baby was smiling ear to ear. Bright eyes and everything. Taking it all in. I guess no one offered them a seat in front, so as they made their way down the aisle, it was like Moses parting the Red Sea. Everyone, or at least it seemed like everyone, looked up, smiled back, waved, did what people do in the presence of that kind of unfiltered joy. It made my day! The happy baby singlehandedly lifted the mood of that bus, even for just a few moments; you know, before we all went back to doing whatever we were doing.

“We find a delight in the beauty and happiness of children,” Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “that makes the heart too big for the body.”

Joy is when our hearts are too big for our bodies, and as God's beloved handiwork, we are made for joy. So it's important for us to remember that God longs for our hearts to be too big for our bodies. Amen? Remember that, OK?

Preparing this sermon, thankfully, helped me remember, again, this week. And so did some love from Amy and Gabe. But the world being what it can so often be, with so many ways to steal our joy, it is easy to forget. It is easy for our hearts to become small. Hard. To lose touch with that God-given joy in us.

So we have to go deep, to the essence of our belovedness and giftedness and interconnectedness. That is the spiritual discipline of it, the intention of cultivating, accessing, the joy that's already in us. That's already in the world. Because it's easy on the surface of things, even under the surface of things, for our joy, the joy of the world around us, to get buried under the weight of the world. Lost in the shuffle of life.

John Donne once wrote that "True joy is the nearest which we have of heaven, it is the treasure of the soul, and therefore should be laid in a safe place, and nothing in this world is safe to place it in."

Joy is a precious gift, and so we need to protect it with our lives because our lives depend on it. We have to guard ourselves and help guard each other against that which threatens to steal our joy. To distract us from it, to pull us away from it.

I have found depression, as just one example, to be a persistent thief.

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation," writes the prophet. Another way of saying you gotta go deep. With joy you will find the living water that refreshes your spirit and renews you in divine love. That reconnects you to your own and each other's belovedness. That is what salvation is, right? In Jesus, the newborn baby, the full-grown prophet and the resurrected Christ, we are forever reminded that we ALL are, more than anything else, beloved. The wells of salvation are deep because salvation is about returning to the depth of our divine belovedness, our core identity, our essence, again and again and again – as Paul Simon writes, "like waves on the sea."

Sin is what disconnects us from our divine belovedness, our own and each other's. And so joy is both a means to and an expression of that belovedness. Joy RECONNECTS us to the God in ourselves, in each other and in the world around us.

You may be familiar with the *Book of Delights*, a New York Times bestselling book of short essays by the poet and professor, Ross Gay. It came out a couple of years ago. Amy has a copy and has been singing its praises in our house for a while. I've only just started reading through it, a handful of chapters so far, but highly recommend.

It's a beautiful book about joy, a reflection of the author's commitment to record, over the course of a year, the small joys we often overlook, that are always there if we're paying attention, and that help keep us connected. But without dismissing the complex reality, his reality as a Black man living in a racist country. Joy is not optimism; it does not mean you're looking at the world through rose-colored glasses. You cannot fake joy.

In one entry, he's talking about healthy forests. How what we see above ground is nothing compared to what's going on underground. Trees constantly in communication with each other, tending to each other's needs through a vast and complex subterranean network of roots.

He describes "fungal duff," healthy forest soil, and describes joy, in the entry's title, as ". . . 'Such a Human Madness': The Duff Between Us."

And this is what he writes: "Because in trying to articulate what, perhaps, joy is, it has occurred to me that among other things—the trees and the mushrooms have shown me this—joy is the mostly invisible, the underground union between us, you and me, which is, among other things, the great fact of our life and lives of everyone and thing we love going away. If we sink a spoon into that fact, the duff between us, we will find it teeming. It will look like all the books ever written. It will look like all the nerves in a body. We might call it sorrow, but we might call it a union, one that, once we notice it, once we bring it into the light, might become flower and food. Might be joy."

Beautiful. Joy as both flower of and food for our souls. Joy as the duff that keeps us alive and deeply connected to each other, whether we realize it or not. And notice, here, I appreciate this so much, his affirmation that sorrow is not as distinct from joy as we might think. It is NOT the opposite of joy. Joy does not replace sorrow because sorrow, similarly, is a means to and an expression of our and each other's belovedness and

connectedness. Sorrow is what we experience when we have lost something or someone we love, and so it's possible to be sorrowful and joyful at the same time – which is why the apostle Paul, in the 2nd letter to the Corinthians, can talk about being “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” Connection is the gift, and sorrow speaks as much to our interconnectedness as joy does. It just looks and feels different.

So there you have it. As someone who is admittedly joy-challenged, that's what I think I know about joy. That's what I believe about joy.

As we continue on this Advent journey, this journey leaning more fully into hope and peace and joy, I'm also reminded of Jesus' instruction to his disciples, just before his arrest and trial and crucifixion. As John's gospel has it, Jesus describes himself as the vine, and talks about abiding in his love and God's love, loving each other as he has loved them. And then he says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Full. Abundant.

That joy, friends, rooted in God's love, is already in you. It's in all of us and in the world around us. Protect it. Guard it. May it be complete, full, abundant, even with the weight of the world and your lives upon you. And may it be so.