
Joy That Joins

Luke 1:24-45

This Advent season, we have been centering our theme in worship on the question: How does a weary world rejoice?

Last Sunday, I talked about the persistent voice of hope, that dares to sing from the shadows, not as a way of escaping it, but as a way of transforming the dark, well before the light arrives: resurrection that begins entombed, a seed that incubates in the cold, dark earth of winter, long before the warmth of Spring calls it from the ground. And in that work of hope, there is a solidarity. I talked about the “dawn chorus” of birds who raise their voice to sing in polyphony long before the sun rises.

Today, I want to talk about joy. What do we speak of when we talk of joy? Because if we’re honest, we tend to avoid speaking of joy at all during the holidays because we fear people will think that we’re not taking life seriously enough. We relegate joy to something best expressed in holiday tunes. It feels safe there, under cloak of jingle bells and dancing elves. It feels safe to make joy seasonal—a socially-agreed-upon allowance we make once a year.

If we’re honest, joy can seem aloof, disconnected from reality. No one wants to be around someone who doesn’t understand the weariness of seasons like this. No one wants to be around that person who wears a *regular* Christmas sweater to a holiday party. Ugly Christmas sweaters seem to be enough cheer while letting others in on the fact that you aren’t getting too close to breaking the joy threshold.

My friend, who lives in our building, just lost his dad to cancer only days ago. This will be a holiday season like no other for him, his wife, and family. As I’ve been reaching out to be a presence in these early days of grieving, I admit that I’ve refrained from using words like joy. For most, joy doesn’t *seem* to belong in

the same room. I think most people equate joy with a feeling that only exists in the absence of other feelings like grief.

We too avoid the prospect of joy: Think about how often, maybe even this morning, when someone asks you, “How are you doing?” or “How’s it going?”—we wouldn’t dare offer a bubbly response. There is a social pact we have all made with each other, right? The “proper” response is, “I’m good,” or “It’s going,” or if you’re feeling extra-honest, (*deep breath*) “I’m here”.

This emotional reductionism is perhaps our protest against the pressures of holiday happiness. It could also be that we’ve been conditioned to value the state of exhaustion, frailty, and feeling frazzled over anything that bespeaks joy—especially in an economy where you are valued by your lack of sleep and how crammed your work schedule is. And when we aren’t trying to keep joy at bay, we cheapen it. We suppress what is seen as the deeper emotions and smooth things over with a warm joy blanket. It’s called social media. It’s how we craft an engaging instagram account that will get tons of subscribers. In a “good vibes only” culture, joy then becomes a smiley facade. I wonder if the church has ever struggled with this.

Today, I want us to consider how often we confuse holiday cheer with biblical joy, which is born in messy stables, not glee-filled house parties. Ross Gay, poet and author of the New York Times Bestseller, *The Book of Delights*, speaks about joy as the result of practicing entanglement.

He writes: “[J]oy is the mostly invisible, the underground union between us, you and me, which is, among other things, the great fact of our life and the lives of everyone and thing we love . . . If we sink a spoon into that fact, into the duff between us, we will find it teeming . . . 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.”

Ross’ description of joy, not as a surface, bubbly countenance, but as an invisible union, an underground network teeming, helps to reframe joy for us. That we are radically connected to one another is a truth that is becoming more evident in our time—a truth we now know from science, in the novel discoveries of quantum entanglement (a seamless connection between bodies), and a truth we know deep in our bones as the ache of empathy and the ointment of solidarity.

We now know that we are far more connected to each other than we ever realized before. So much so, that our separateness is only a perception of the mind than anything based in reality. Joy is the evidence of this connection. It is “bringing the knowledge of this into the light”, as Ross puts it. It is the result of participating in this web of interconnectedness.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Elizabeth is visited by Mary. They are both pregnant: Elizabeth, much older than Mary, is pregnant with John the Baptist, who will prepare the way for Jesus’ earthly ministry. Mary, is carrying Jesus.

Consider the picture of joy the gospel writer paints here: Mary arrives at the house of Zechariah likely extremely exhausted after making what would have been a days-long journey, about 100 miles and much of it uphill. After finally making it to this Judean town in the hill country, she enters the house and receives a blessing: “Blessed are you among women,” and Elizabeth calls her the mother of her lord, saying the child in her womb leapt at the sight of her arrival. This blessing and affirmation caused Mary to turn this encounter into a musical and bursts into song, the well-known Magnificat.

It is for good reason that often in this passage we foreground the sheltering and blessing of Mary by Elizabeth. Yet, we might overlook a detail at the very beginning of this passage. It says, “Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion.” It says she had received so much disgrace from her people. I wonder if we know anything about the ridicule and shame we can receive, even from those closest to us.

Elizabeth went into hiding. This part, we don’t find depicted in Advent artwork. We are much more comfortable rushing to the exuberance of the Magnificat. And had not Mary arrived, what would have been the extent of Elizabeth’s isolation? John somersaults within her womb at the sound of Mary’s voice. The joy is almost instantaneous, as Mary’s presence breaks the isolation for Elizabeth. Joy erupts between these two not out of their situation—deep seclusion and a treacherous journey for the teenage mother are hardly reasons to rejoice. Joy was the response of waking up to the reality that they were connected. Joy always resists seclusion and the despair that comes from disconnection.

Professor and author Willie James Jennings, in a talk entitled “Joy That Joins”, said the first thing we must say of joy is that it is work. Joy is a work, before it

is a sentiment. It is the discipline of connection before it is a feeling—the feeling perhaps follows when we engage the practice well. And the work is hard.

We often romanticize Christmastime as the most wonderful time of year, full of laughter, cheer, and goodwill to neighbor. And yet, what do we often find as soon as Dec. 25th has passed? We immediately shift back to a reality of isolation—the cheer instantly evaporates as we rush to beat traffic in order to make returns on our gifts, spend our gift cards, isolate ourselves in relishing the great haul of presents we accumulated Christmas morning. Katie and I always talk about the irony that is the post-Christmas whiplash. Does this reveal that perhaps we lean into the sentiment of joy and not the practice of joy? Our interconnectedness is never seasonal. It is also not situational. Therefore, joy is always possible.

Willie James Jennings, in his talk, spoke about how joy is limited by our imagination. We are forced to imagine our joy work in isolation or against one another because of fear of exploitation. When we are not attuned to connection, and imagine a situation where we are disconnected, we work to manifest that lack of connection, perhaps as a sadness, a lack of joy. He says, we should celebrate, dream, and manifest the truth that we belong to each other as if our lives depended on it, because it is indeed tied to what it means to be human. When we deny ourselves that awareness, for fear of how we might come across—as less-than-serious about life—we are denying ourselves the very essence of our humanity.

In a few moments, you'll be invited to gather around this communion table once more. May we gather as if our lives depend on it. Our connection here should be the reason for our deepest joy. Yet, it would seem odd to speak of joy concerning this table of remembrance around the crucifixion of Christ. Yet this is what we're asked to do: In Hebrews chapter 12, it says, "[L]et us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake *of the joy* that was set before him endured the cross."

How does a cross produce joy? How does a weary world rejoice? Because Jesus knew that cruciform love images connection for a humanity that had become disconnected, dis-integrated. The cross was the spark of joy we needed to imagine this given reality.

In closing, what if we saw joy and delight, not as a feeling we muster up in order to present ourselves a certain way, but as a waking up to the reality of our

connectedness? To do this, we return to the basics. We have to learn what it is to be human together in an age of isolation, loneliness and political polarization. The basics matter: listening, befriending, immersing oneself in experiences far removed from one's own, finding ways to come alongside one another and cultivating practices which expand our capacity for empathy. This, my friends, is the work of joy. It is hard work. But may it be a joy-filled work. Amen.