

Advent 2022 - The Joy of Christmas:

An Advent Prayer - Joy

Rev. Paul Sauer -Lutheran Forum:

Our good God, set our minds on heavenly, good, and Christ-worthy things, and fill us with your joy.



Help us receive the simple joys of life, like morning dew, high mountains, green valleys, and beautiful music.

Remind us of the joy that comes from receiving our daily bread, forgiving and being forgiven, and being rescued from the temptation and evil that besets us.

Renew our commitment to joy in a world that seeks to dissuade and deter us from it.

Strengthen our joy in Your promises and work in the world that will not fail.

Lord of light in whom there is no darkness at all, make our joy complete. These prayers we offer through Christ, our truest joy, amen.

Advent Joy Reflections

Here are the three written reflections on Advent joy from yesterday's worship service:

Advent Joy Reflection #1 – Rejoicing At His Birth:

In the first chapter of Luke's gospel, we are told that God's angel came to a religious leader named Zechariah to let him know that he was going to have a son, who in time will come to be known as John the Baptist. Part of the angel's message to Zechariah reads as follows in verse 14: "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth."

"You will have joy and gladness" – the divine messenger in no way whatsoever needed to tell Zechariah or us, the readers, that. We've been told previously in Luke 1 that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were childless, that Elizabeth had been unable to get pregnant, and that they were getting older. At best their culture would have interpreted their inability to conceive as a terribly-unfortunate turn for Zechariah, who would have no heir to carry on his name and profession, and at worst as God's judgment upon them for some unknown sin or stubbornness. So, yes, with confidence we can say - Zechariah and Elizabeth might be just a little ecstatic about this news...

How many times had they cried out to heaven and felt unheard, God perhaps otherwise preoccupied with far important things than their personal misfortune that seemed so miniscule in comparison to the sorrows and sufferings of the entire world? How many times did this couple, who are said in Luke 1.6 to be "righteous and blameless," careful and diligent observers of all God's commands, wonder if the misgivings whispered about their character were somehow true? How many times had Zechariah the priest offered thanksgiving sacrifice on behalf of others while he wrestled with his own doubt, and how many times had he been present at a circumcision of someone else's son to offer a blessing while the ache of never having experienced the elation of a newborn child himself ate away at his faith?

And right there in the midst of his temple duties, as we're told in Luke 1.13, an angel appears to tell him that God, despite all previous evidence to the contrary, has indeed been listening, paying attention to each and every petition lifted to Him over what must have been decades, both the ones voiced in hope and the ones devoid of all hope, receiving them, clutching them to His divine heart, and waiting. And finally that waiting, mistakenly but understandably interpreted by Zechariah and Elizabeth to be definitive and absolute, was done.

I don't know your joys this morning. I don't even know if you're joyful this morning. But I am pretty confident that everyone of us today, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, is hoping for a joy that has yet to arrive or that may seem to have escaped God's watchful eye. Some of us wait patiently, some of us impatiently, our souls pacing back and forth nervously like they've had one too many espressos, embarrassed by how many times we've banged on God's front door hoping He'll answer, and yet others among us have forgotten that we're waiting for possible yet unforeseen joy at all, having been coaxed by life's inevitable attrition at some past point to trade our anticipation for disappointment, and to let our expectation succumb to a stoic "Oh, what's the use?"

Surely one can forgive Zechariah for not believing the angel's outlandish promise. That the old, faithful priest didn't faint on the spot or didn't run away shrieking in terror is itself quite miraculous. For his inability to believe the unbelievable, he would get to put in a kind of spiritual timeout: he was unable to speak and most likely even hear for at least nine months, so he would be alone with all of his excited, confused, dumbfounded thoughts, filling his every waking hour, even as he watched his wife's belly grow little by little.

How many times has God offered us joy, perhaps even His very answer to our own long-unrequited desires, and our response is some mixture of "I can't do that," "You can't do that," "I don't deserve that," or "You're too late"? Might not the best thing for us be, when joy springs upon us like a lioness in hiding, to stop talking and fall silent, or to accept what we're being given and not try to explain why it's possible or why it's impossible? If it took this good and commendable man 3/4 of a year to steep in the joyous proclamation of what God would do for him, maybe it's perfectly ok, even predictable, that we also might be sluggish or hesitant to acknowledge and then gulp down the joys that God bestows upon us sometimes?

Henri Nouwen wrote that, "Each day holds a surprise. But only if we expect it can we see, hear, or feel it when it comes to us." There are joys you see coming, and then there are the joys you don't. In fact, an unperceived, unrecognized joy might only be a joy to the God from whom it comes, but not to the would-be recipient who ambles right past it unaware.

This Advent season, may God's joy sneak up behind you and surprise you. Your instinct might be to flee from it in sheer panic, or to try and understand it before you'll allow it, or even to forgo it because you've been waiting so very long, but better for you to react with wonder, worship, and gratitude. May your quick, responsive rejoicing be an adequate and proportional match to the joy itself that God gives you, for joy, as it turns out, is both a grace and a choice.

Advent Joy Reflection #2 – Incomplete Joy:

Advent joy is incomplete joy.

Few of us can imagine the jubilation that Zechariah and Elizabeth felt when their promised son John arrived. Each hour with their one and only child, even all the sleepless ones deep in the night punctuated by his cries, would have been precious. Finally they were able to experience the simple happiness of holding a toddler's hand while he learned to walk, or the inexpressible delight of a young one saying the words "Mommy" and "Daddy" for the first time.

But their joy was not to last. It was almost certainly cut short. They were old when John was born, so, given the shorter life spans for those in their world, it seems reasonable to conclude that their deaths came far too early in John's life. Did they live long enough to see him grow tall, enter adolescence, and become a man? No one knows. Was it their funerals, one then the other, that drove John out into the wilderness to wander, seek God, and grow into the spiritual powerhouse he would become? One has to wonder if Zechariah the Levitical priest, part of Judaism's authoritative religious leadership, would have kept rejoicing in his son, or instead recoiled from him, as adult John openly sparred with and subverted that power structure?

On what we now call Christmas Eve, the angel of the Lord declared to the shepherds in Luke 2.10 that "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." And surely that was true – kinda.

On the one hand, after hundreds of years, most filled with Israel's grief and subjugation, God's Anointed One was finally coming to liberate and redeem them. As Jesus' own mother Mary said of Him during her pregnancy in what we now call her Magnificat: through Him God was showing the strength of His bared arm, scattering and befuddling the proud, bringing down the powerful and raising up the lowly, filling the hungry and making the rich leave empty, and in mercy remembering His ancient promises made to Israel.

But on the other hand, none of that was to unfold in a way that conformed to anyone's expectations, so much so that the Jesus Israel got was almost entirely out of sync with the Messiah they wanted. This was no less true for Mary herself: her miraculous son, the one about whom she was told the most remarkable things by angels and prophets alike, the one she nursed and nurtured, grew into a man who baffled her more often than He didn't. Her rejoicing at His birth may well be equaled by her confusion about Him, and occasional frustration with Him, as an adult.

So in a sense the joy of those present in the Advent and Christmas stories was naïve, as partial and even as incomprehensible as the first few chapters of a novel without the rest of the story. In that way you could call it hollow, a husk waiting to be filled by what was to come, a mold into which the good stuff would be poured.

Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds were not joy experts in need of no further tutelage. Neither are we, for there are no joy experts, nor has there ever been.

How joy worked for them is how it works for all of us. No single joy is whole or permanent. Joy ebbs and flows like the tide. That which brings you great delight today may well be the source of great bewilderment tomorrow.

There is tremendous freedom in this, especially for those of us living in 21st-century America, where euphoria is everywhere presented on every platform possible to be the daily norm and nowhere experienced as such, where positive emotions are seen not as a cultivated skill but as a birth right, and where we can never be wrong, not even about what we think brings us fulfillment and enjoyment.

If no joy is meant to last in its current form, then we can appreciate it for what it is when it is. If no joy is complete in and of itself, then we can stop asking each single joy to make us satisfied once and for all. There are no bold-typefaced, all caps, underscored, exclamation-pointed JOYS, just humble, small case ones. And if we're willing to trade in the faulty notion of joy as a perpetual neon sign burning away to hold our attention, maybe we can actually be happy?

There is a Latin expression that is said to originate with St. Augustine in the 300s AD: "Solvitur ambulando," or, "It is solved by walking." Joy seems to follow that maxim: you possess joy, but you also discover it along the way; you may have joy today, but it only stays with you if you're willing to reconsider it tomorrow. Joy is more dynamic than it is static. It yearns to move with us month by month and year by year through life, it is an unfolding road, most of which lies unseen over the horizon, it is not a residence, it is not a destination.

I hope you are rejoicing this Advent, your heart so full that you can scarcely stop from humming, singing, or grinning, just like Zechariah, just like Mary, and just like the shepherds in Luke 1-2. But remember that joy is a traveling companion, not a housemate. Don't try to clutch it with white knuckles, pressing it to your chest, afraid of losing it. And we only really know why we should celebrate the Jesus of Christmas if we're willing to walk with Him into His iconoclastic, prophetic, compassionate public ministry, all the way to His tragic death, then to His triumphant resurrection and ascension. Christmas joy, like every single, solitary one of your present joys, is merely a starting line.

Advent Joy Reflection #3 – Joy For One And All:

What are my joys, I ask? There's the obvious, boilerplate stuff – all three persons in my family and each in their own distinctive way, so many engaging and delightful people in the KirkWood community, and a vocation that I love and which brings me a great sense of meaning and value – well, most of the time. Then there's all the things I tend to take for granted because they're so familiar – a lovely townhouse that includes a home office for undisturbed work and playing Xbox while I should be doing undisturbed work, a big screen TV for viewing football, basketball, premium cable television, the Food Network, and obscure History Channel shows that moderately irk my wife, a working and reliable automobile with heated seats and satellite radio, and a freezer in my garage for all the leftovers I won't force my family to eat three days straight.

But there's more, of course. I'm so very glad that even with my awful, very bad, no good eyes I can still read and thereby learn, and see in an admittedly fuzzy, out of focus way all the intricate beauty of God's creation. Even though I'm on the wrong side of 50, I'm still reasonably healthy – I can still walk, talk, think, and feel.

And, like many hearing this rambling stream of consciousness, I am most grateful for a God whose reach is never exceeded by the distance I wander away and who is the one light that cannot be extinguished by the darkness in me or around me, and for Christ who is majestic and moving enough to be worth my life.

Abraham Maslow in his famous hierarchy of human needs could have predicted much of what I touched on just now, if not some of its idiosyncrasies. Do I rejoice that my physical and safety needs are met? Yes. Do I celebrate the people who are my support system, who make my life whole, and who show me grace when I've lost sight of it? For sure. Am I respected for what I do, and does it build my self-esteem? Well, I'm a pastor, so there's a funny way for me to answer that question, but I'll play nice and offer another "yes." Have I found a way to give the best of who I am to others that benefits them and that also fills me with purpose? One more time - yes. And have I in moments of flow, prayer, worship, self-giving, love, and delight transcended myself and sensed that I am part of something far larger and more wondrous? Absolutely – the older I get, the more and more that's true, and it may well be the single most important realization of my life.

So there it is in full view – joy, at least in some form or fashion, at every level of my one and very small human existence.

All that said, now remember again the words of the angel to the shepherds in the gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verse 10: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” Linger on that last phrase – “for all the people.”

Most Israelites in the 1st-century would have wanted no part of global, equitable good news, of this we can be sure. No, for that would have meant that this divine joy breaking into the world from heaven would be for immoral, lascivious pagans who prayed to gods who were not gods, and for the haughty Roman empire under whose boots they were crushed, including the imperial dignitaries who taxed Israel into oblivion, and its soldiers who could do whatever they wanted whenever they wanted to any Hebrew – and very often did.

For the Jews, who had spent most of their history oppressed by one foreign power after another and suffering the consequences of their own fickle loyalty to God, this promised good news was theirs and only theirs. Finally wrongs would be righted, and tables would be turned. Understood as they saw it, redemption hope was parochial – it was for them and only them, or at the very least, for them to finally be at the head of the line.

If you will, good news for them meant bad news for everyone else. A God of covenant faithfulness and unquenchable mercy required a God of red-hot vengeance. A God who rebuilds must be a God who burns down. If they were to flourish, others would need to be vanquished. If there was to be justice, it meant payback for all the injustice they had endured.

Before we shake our heads and judge them too harshly or quickly, let’s admit together that we’re not all that different. It seems to be human instinct to want God’s best for me and mine first. Let’s face it – I spend WAY more time mulling my own happiness than I do yours. As the philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell once posited, we all want our own motives to be more altruistic than they actually are, we all overestimate our own merits, and we all want others to take as much of an interest in us as we take in ourselves. That seems a fairly accurate summarization of both our species’ penchant for self-absorption, and the bleakness it leaves in its wake.

And so the angel said God’s good news which is a great joy will be for everyone. For you, and for everybody who isn’t you. For your family, and for every other family. For your church, and for every other church, and even for those who don’t go to church. For friends, for strangers, and, yes, for enemies.

So I ask again – what are my joys? As you heard, my list is long and it is specific. But, far more substantially, the joys I want for myself, in their variety, quality, and richness, should be the very same joys I want for everyone else. What joys I have received, they should. What joys I've worked toward, I should ensure they can.

Could it not be said that I only really grasp and believe in God's good news offered through Christ as much as I believe in it for others? Is it not true that I only participate in God's great joy now shining in the world as much as I help others participate in it too? And, to borrow a sentence construction from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., is not the absence of joy anywhere a threat to joy everywhere?

This Advent, may we be a little less obsessed with our own fulfillment, and little more committed to someone else's. My individual joy is like a hot ember: it cools, turns gray, and ultimately dies out in isolation, but it can spark incalculable bright and beautiful rejoicing in others if I so choose. Joy, to be joy in any Christian or even Christmas sense, must be shared.

Heavenly joy, properly conceived in the angel's declaration, is far grander in scope and scale than just little ol' me. My personal joy is at best one note in a symphony, one raindrop in the ocean, and one star in a spinning galaxy. In the end, joy for one amounts to almost nothing without the hope of joy for all.