

## Advent 4, 2020 - Finding Joy

This week's sermon was written by others - some of them reflections from those who participated in our Advent Meditation Group this year, and I want to give each of them credit and more importantly, my deep gratitude. For it is when we share the truth of our own experience, sometimes able to name the the presence of God in the midst of it, that we bless others. I was richly blessed this week by others thoughts and so I share them with you.

First the context this week's sermon. We are speaking to the theme of Joy this morning. If we think of joy in the fleeting ways of feeling happy, it may feel like a cruel trick to be speaking to this, this morning, as we anticipate a very different kind of Christmas. This will be for me, like many others, the very first Christmas of my entire life without the company of my extended family, and in particular, my parents. Where is the joy in that?

Of course, the joy we are speaking of this morning is not the fleeting happiness of good times. It is the deeper joy of God that runs throughout our lives like an underground river. Full of clean, fresh, life-giving water, but not always seen or accessible. And today, along with Mary, we are invited to consider that very real joy in the midst of our very real lives.

Along with Mary, who despite the many sorrows she endured as the mother of Jesus, was able to sing and calls us to sing with her,

“In God my Saviour, shall my heart rejoice”

First I share with you a reflection from the Blog, Spacious Faith, by Joanna Harader. Joanna is a Mennonite Pastor in Kansas, and offers this reflection out of the lived experience of her father's death this past year...

We get Christmas cards with pictures of happy, smiling families and we grieve the broken relationships in our own family. We reach out to family and friends, keenly aware of the ones who have died—those that should be there, but are not. During this time of Santa and stories and gifts, many mourn the children they did not have; some mourn the things they cannot give to their loved ones because money is too tight. There are as many causes for grief as for celebration in these festive weeks.

The good news for us, though, the blessing for those who mourn during this time, is that our Christian faith provides an alternative to the loud sounds and bright lights of the season. Our faith gives us Advent, a time of deep waiting.

At its heart, Advent is an acknowledgment of our deep need . . . and it is a celebration of God's response to that need in Jesus Christ. If there were no sorrow and grief, no loss and longing, then the incarnation would not have been necessary—the Christ child would not have come.

So this is what I want to say to everyone whose raw grief rubs up against the surface sparkle of the season: Your sorrow is not counter to the story of Jesus' birth. It is an integral part of the story. It is the reason for the story.

The happiness of Christmas is fleeting. The joy of Christmas is in knowing the One who bears our grief with us, who heals and redeems us.

Thank you Joanna.

Walking the road with enough courage and strength, so that from time to time we see that deep river of joy surface into our lives and we get to drink from that live-giving stream, is something that Mary's own life witnesses to us, as it witnessed to the first disciples.

From...Two Listeners, a daily reflection that Anne Lane receives, this from Wednesday this week, speaking in God's voice....

Between My Promise of the Gift of Joy to My disciples and their realization of that Joy came a sense of failure, disappointment, denial, desertion, hopelessness, then hope, waiting, and courage in the face of danger.

Joy is the reward of patiently seeing Me in the dull dark days, of trusting when you cannot see. . . .Joy is as it were your heart's response to My smile of recognition of your faithfulness. . . .

Thank you Anne, and thank you to the Two Listeners, whoever they may be.

And so we continue in the ways of faith. We donate to the food bank, again this year and next. We give some money to the Salvation Army hoping it brings a gift and a smile to a child who otherwise might not get one. We make the phone call to our elderly neighbour who is alone, even though we are so busy or feeling rather down ourselves. We still offer a prayer of thanksgiving at the Christmas feast before us, even if we are the only one sitting at the table, because, like Mary, we proclaim and hold in our hearts the truth of God's action and engagement in this world.

We remember and we sing with Mary that God...

... has mercy on those who fear Him

in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm,

He has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich He has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of His servant Israel  
for He has remembered his promise of mercy,

We continue in the very real actions of faith that this season of Advent calls us to each and every year - living out of the ongoing conversation of hope that we choose to have with each other, finding peace in the wild places of our lives, and reading God's love letter to us in Jesus and sharing that with others,

and as Karen Barney, one of our Advent meditation group, reflected...

Hope + peace + love (all intentional actions on our part) = Joy

Thank you Karen.

Let me end now and later when we close this service, with a familiar benediction from Jude chapter 1:

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.