

Inner Joy in God's Kingdom Come

The good news is that unlike last Sunday, this sermon does not come with a warning that the content may be triggering for some people.

Families are complicated. The truth is that almost every family has at least one black sheep, a family member who does not fit in, and at least one skeleton lurking in a closet, something bad or embarrassing that we would rather the knowledge of it remains out of sight.

Most of the time these people are pushed aside and kept out of sight. It might be the brother we never talk about after he left town, or when we got fired from our job. The memory of the brother or that day hangs over us, taking up space, not all the time usually, but it can pop up at unexpected moments.

Sometimes that incessantly happy Christmas music in stores and other public places can be a real irritation, because it does not fit our mood. Sometimes that happy music can trigger a memory of unwrapping Christmas presents with the brother or the strain and low spirits that the job loss put on the household that year. Sometimes the music can irritate because of our situation today. It might be family loss or sickness, job insecurity or family tensions.

If this has just triggered one of those memories, tell it – yeah, yeah, I know you are there, now just get back into the box on the shelf.

The season of Advent is a time of waiting, and the reality is that most of us do not like waiting. In the church, this season of waiting is important; we do not jump into the wonderful celebrations of Christmas and the birth of Christ until Christmas Eve.

Yes, the church is a counter-cultural organisation, and it always has been. We have a good role model, namely, Jesus.

As our Advent candle lighting liturgy reminded us, the shadows of sadness lurk around us may be because we have lost loved one recently, someone we know is in prison, or a feeling of isolation and aloneness. The holiday be dreaded because of painful memories or because we do not want to spend another Christmas alone.

Yet, today, the Third Sunday of Advent is the celebration of Joy. This is not the joy of hearty Christmas carols, of gathered family, of an array of wrapped Christmas presents and of full table groaning under the weight of many tasty dishes.

The joy of the Third Sunday of Advent is the quiet inner joy that comes with peace and hope. It is much less the joy of jubilation, exuberance or triumph. It is much more the joy of contentment, serenity, fulfilment and peace of mind.

It is the joy that comes from hearing and knowing that Jesus brings healing to all in need. As Jesus said to John's disciples in the gospel: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matthew 11:4-6)

It is the joy that knows the grace of God as spoken by Isaiah. God's grace is not limited to human beings but reaches to all of creation – the animals and birds, the flowers and trees, the rocks and rivers. The weak and fearful will be made strong, there will be water in the

desert, the highway will be safe and straight. Isaiah tells them:
 “everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
 they shall obtain joy and gladness,
 and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isaiah 35:10)

It is Mary's joy as she sings that wonderful prayer and song of praise that we know as the Magnificat. Mary sings it when she arrives to visit her cousin Elizabeth and Elizabeth's baby leaps for joy in her womb.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,” (Luke 1:46-47)

Mary goes on to give thanks for the many, many blessings in her life. God's mercy and strength, and for God keeping the promise made to their ancestors that a saviour would be sent.

It is the joy that has patience, the sort of patience that a farmer has as they wait for their crop to grow, as we heard in the Letter of James.

On the subject of waiting, Sanhita Baruah, in her book, *The Art of Healing: Notes for Life* gives that sage piece of advice: “Good things take time, better things take a little longer.”
 Patience.

There is also that famous writing from the book of Ecclesiastes that Pete Seeger turned into a song in 1959. The song is called “*Turn! Turn! Turn!*” also known as or subtitled “*To Everything There is a Season.*” It was adapted by the Byrds and became a billboard hit in 1965. The passage is read at both weddings and funerals, the opening verse is:

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven”
 (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

And ends, “a time to love, and a time to hate;
 a time for war, and a time for peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3:8)

And on the subject of waiting to do the right thing rather than rushing, I came across a lyric from the Rapper Masta Ace, that goes like this:

“whole lot of a right, add a little bit of wrong, and everything you worked for gone.”
 Patience.

One of the greatest gifts we have been given is the quiet inner joy that comes with the peace and hope in knowing that God's son was sent for us, that God is with us. One of the greatest gifts we can give is to share that quiet inner joy.

We light the candles of the Advent wreath as a reminder of the many wonderful gifts God has given us. A reminder of the light shining in the darkness.

Remember, we are a candle in the darkness of someone else's life.

As a candle shining for others, we cannot see our own light.

However, we do see the light that others shine. They are shining brighter because they have seen our light shining.

In the words of Paul to the people of Rome: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.

Readings: Matthew 11:2-11
 Luke 1:46-55

Isaiah 35:1-10
 James 5:7-10