

**“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee?”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Dec. 11, 2022**

**Please Read:
Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11**

Today, traditionally known as *Gaudete Sunday*, from the Latin imperative, “rejoice!”, we light a weirdly colored pink candle on the Advent wreath, symbolizing joy. I love this rather subversive act as we draw nearer to the darkest time of the year. We could say we live in the best of times and the worst of times, depending on how you look at it. On the one hand, you’ve got more than 103 million displaced persons on the planet, the highest number ever recorded. Forty-five percent of them are children. There are the devastating natural disasters from Climate Change. Rising hate crimes. Entrenched political divisions. You’ve got the inept but nonetheless terrifying plotters in Germany and Peru, and then there’s the 10 year anniversary of the shootings in Newtown with the footnote: *School shootings have tripled since then*. Do you remember Uvalde this past May, where 19 children and two adults were killed at Robb Elementary School? Or we could talk about more personal losses and griefs, like Don O’Brien, one of our town heroes who died on Thanksgiving Day, mercifully after 10 years battling a debilitating neurological disease... The obvious question is, unless you’re living in a cave, what person in their right mind would be talking about joy?

And yet... This is the project of Christian faith, and what we’re about every Sunday. We don’t stick our heads in the sand and live in denial. We face the terror and tragedy of life head on, and as declare that while it may be Friday, Sunday’s a comin’. While there’s painful suffering and losses, death will not have the last word. There is the promise. Despite what we may see around us, there is the “and yet...” of faith, because we know that God is not finished yet...

The painting here is for the Service of Remembrance on Wednesday, thanks to Dan Mason who has spent hours going up to Vermont to talk with the artist, Rebecca Purdum, and together they brought it down this week. I encourage you to read the interview in the Tidings from Friday, as the interview is powerful and gives insight into possible interpretations of this work. We display it today so that you can also reflect on the paradox of joy.

At first glance, it’s a big black canvass.... But as you look more closely, you see how Rebecca has created a complex painting that I think captures very well our lesson today, and perhaps the larger theme of Advent that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. I invite you after the service to come

closer to this magnificent work to see the subtle pinks and purples, to notice the glimpse of light in the middle of the painting, and even the subtle yet unmistakable cross that emerges from the shadows... Despite the pain of loss, the terrible violence of our world, we still can find joy. We can still sing about joy. Leonard Cohen's famous "Anthem" lyrics declare, "Ring the bells that still can ring; Forget your perfect offering; There is a crack, a crack in everything; That's how the light gets in."

In our lesson from Isaiah we read about the Israelites' return after exile, through the wilderness to the promised land. Unlike their exodus journey, this pilgrimage is marked with rejoicing; the desert crocus blossoms beneath their feet, waters and streams quench the thirsty land, the burning sands are cooled as the people sing their way home, praising God. But the trials of the people are not over. The enemies that surround them are real and powerful. But the message of seeking joy during suffering is meaningful no matter where we are on our journey. As much as we like to celebrate the idyllic beauty of life in so many ways, real life is no fairy tale, and joy is all the more precious when it is found and embraced amidst despair.

If you remember, last week we heard John the Baptist confidently proclaiming that Jesus is the promised one, "Behold the Lamb of God... Prepare the way of the Lord" because he believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But in today's reading, John seems to have his doubts. He's been arrested and will soon be executed by Herod. He is questioning now if Jesus, is, indeed the "coming one."

Jesus responds with what they can see and hear: "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..." But then Jesus challenges us all by asking, "What do you expect? What are you really looking for?" He assures us that the Kingdom of God, the reign of God's shalom, the way it's supposed to be, has begun in him, and that there is now a shift. Humanity before John had its greatness, but in Jesus' Kingdom even the least will be greater than John...

Like John, we may ask the same questions: if Jesus really is the one who brings God's rule to fruition, why is our world still marked by exploitation, injustice, polarization, violence and all the rest? Why are we still waiting? How long must we wait? Will Jesus really come to redeem those who suffer, or should we look for another? What's the point of faith, anyway? These are profound questions...

And this is where I think it is important to make the distinction between faith *in* Jesus and the faith *of* Jesus... Richard Rohr, a Franciscan teacher, writes this, "Most

Christians think having faith means “to believe *in* Jesus.” But “to share in the faith of Jesus” is a much richer concept. It is not so much an invitation as it is a cosmic declaration about the very shape of reality.” Jesus knew his relationship with God was secure... What if we lived as Beloved Children of God, as heirs of the King of the Universe. What if we let go of our orphan mentality of hoarding what we have, and live generously, willing to love others even to the point of emptying ourselves completely, confident that not even death can separate us from the love of God?

Rohr concludes, “*Jesus’ and Paul’s notion of faith is much better translated as foundational confidence or trust that God cares about what is happening right now. This is clearly the quality that Jesus fully represents and then praises in other people. God refuses to be known intellectually. God can only be loved and known in the act of love; God can only be experienced in communion. This is why Jesus “commands” us to move toward love and fully abide there. Love is like a living organism, an active force-field upon which we can rely, from which we can draw, and we can allow to pass through us.*”

Yes, it's one thing to talk about faith. It's another to live it. I find it fascinating that in the gospel of John, not once does Jesus use the noun of faith. It's always a verb. Faith is primarily not something you just think about. It's something you do!

What if we in these dark days of Advent, and strange days of uncertainty, what if we are called out to be with those who are suffering, to be with the blind, the lame, the unclean, the deaf, and the dead? What if in going to be with those who are hurting, showing God's love and compassion, even allowing the joy of the Lord to break through the darkness, what if that is exactly how we are going to find our deepest joy?

I love our closing hymn today, *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*. The lyrics were written in 1907 by a Presbyterian clergy named Henry Van Dyke. He was a guest preacher at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, up in the Berkshires. He was a military chaplain so there is no chance this was merely Pollyanna happy clappy living in denial kind of joy. He knew that there was suffering in the world.. And yet... The story goes that Van Dyke handed the poem to the president of Williams college, saying: “Here is a hymn for you. Your mountains were my inspiration. But it must be sung to the music of Beethoven’s ‘Hymn to Joy.’”

Now what you may not know is that Beethoven’s ‘Hymn to Joy’ is from his last and most famous 9th symphony completed three years before his death, and what is astonishing to me is that Beethoven had gone completely deaf ten years before he

finished it. Now think about that for a moment. One of the greatest composers of all time had completely lost his hearing, and he concludes his *magnum opus* on the climactic note of joy. It's like an exclamation point on his life, that suffering, and death will not have the last word.

This is what faith is all about. Living through the reality of pain and suffering in this world, yet confident there is something more, looking for where God is at work and joining in, looking for those opportunities to share God's hope, peace, joy and love...

And so we will light the pink candle, and sing confidently that glorious doxology of faith. There is still doom and gloom in the world, to be sure... and yet, even dimly, we see it and we hear it... "Mortals, join the happy chorus which the morning stars began. Love divine is reigning o'er us, joining all in heaven's plan. Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife. Joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life!"

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.