

How Will We Share Joy?

What a gift it is to be gathered today via live stream and in this house of worship on land which has been loved by First Nations and other people long before us and which we hope will be cherished well into the future.

As we move deeper into the Advent season, scriptures beckon us to pause and reflect upon deep truths of our faith. Two weeks ago, the theme of **hope** invited us to wonder: Do we plant seeds of hope? Last Sunday, the theme of **peace** invited us to wonder: How can we prepare space for peace. Next Sunday, the theme of **love** will invite us to wonder what love makes possible.

Today, the theme of **joy** invites us to wonder: How will we share joy? Let's open this time of reflection with words of prayer: God of all and Emmanuel – God with us, as we move deeper into your Advent and toward the light of Christmas Day, further open our hearts and our minds to a new arrival of your Christ Light truly influencing the ways we live. Amen.

Fellow followers of Jesus, what kind of joy do you experience in your life? What kind? Merriam Webster Dictionary defines joy in two distinct ways, which I see as joy with clear attachments to causes and joy without clear attachments to causes. First, joy can be delight – *“the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.”* Delight is joy with clear attachments to particular experiences or outcomes. Joy can also be bliss – *“a state of happiness or felicity.”* Bliss is joy without clear attachments to particular experiences or outcomes.

Which kind of joy do you long to access more often and with greater ease – the joyful emotion of delight in response to or anticipating a positive experience (like family gathering, a hoped-for present opened, or a goal met)?

Or the more inexplicable joyful state of bliss in which happiness rises up and overflows from somewhere mysterious (maybe in beautiful places where that happens for you most often)?

Developing a clearer sense of how we access joy can support us in finding ways to share joy with others and in holding ourselves open and available both to initiate the sharing of joy and responding to someone else's joy-filled initiative. I encourage us to be on the lookout for our opportunities for both kinds of joy during this full season of Advent, Christmas, and even the gift-giving season of Epiphany.

Let's turn to our scripture readings for today, with an open posture toward how they can encourage our experiences of joy.

The First Song of Isaiah (which I learned as a grade school student and got to sing in the Lutheran junior choir alongside our adult choir) invites us to consider the ages old concept of salvation as cause for joy. As the gathered community of St. Croix United Church, our theology of salvation is alive and varied, influenced by many free thinkers from various branches of the Christian tradition. It's important to acknowledge that some of us were raised in Christian communities with closed-circuit theologies that attempted to tell us that Jesus made salvation happen one time in history and that we would be saved (that is, go to heaven when we die) if we adhere to the precisely correct beliefs about Jesus and ourselves. That theology suffocated my spirit and thwarted any flickering potential for Christian faith to be a life-giving and life-affirming salvific experience.

I now understand and experience salvation as our cyclical journey toward reconnection with the love of God. Each of us is a unique embodiment of the love of God; salvation is the full realization of that truth.

We tend to move through times of feeling disconnected from the love of God, stretching and straining the integrity of our identity as beloved of God and through times of feeling a deep sense of belonging, connection, belovedness.

Isaiah offers us a very clear sense of who God is to that writer: *“Surely, it is God who saves me... For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and God will be my Savior.”* (Isa. 12:2). The love of God carries us into strength and refuge. Another way of describing salvation is as breakthrough moments of deep connection, of knowing that we are always beloved and always growing.

Today’s reading from the letter to the Philippians also offers a glimpse of salvation as an ongoing process. I’d like to share a few of those words again:

“I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ...And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what really matters.” We are each a work in progress and Philippians reminds us of that.

In this morning’s gospel reading, Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist (fiery John the Baptist) makes a strong statement. He says, *“God can raise children for Sarah and Abraham from these very stones.”* I invite you to consider this morning (as you wonder about participating in the joy of salvation) how you might rise up and live as more than a stone and how we (together in community) might rise up and live as more than a collection of stones.

I recently came across a quote from Scott Peck, a twentieth century psychiatrist and author, who lived from 1936 to 2005 and wrote a book called *The Road Less Traveled*. He once wrote these words: "*The whole course of human history may depend on a change of heart in one solitary and even humble individual—for it is in the solitary mind and soul of the individual that the battle between good and evil is waged and ultimately won or lost.*"

If we are each to experience personal evolution, maturation, even transformation; we need to attune ourselves closely to the battle between good and evil that exists within each of us. We know quite well our personal capacities both for love of God, self and others and for closing ourselves off from sharing love with God, self and others. In our private lives, we become frustrated with ourselves when we forget to love – shrinking back when we reach a threshold where we could have stepped beyond our comfort zones of avoidance or denial. Instead, we provide space for hurt and distance to continue to gain control within our personal relationships. It's very much the opposite of the joy of salvation.

In our public lives, we become frustrated with ourselves when we forget to love, shrinking back when we reach a threshold where we could have stepped beyond our comfort zones to confront postures of prejudice and inequitable practices. Yes, we need to attune ourselves to the battle between good and evil that is waged and ultimately won or lost within each of us. And we need to find greater strength and solidarity as we work together as a faith community to impact unjust societal patterns.

I believe that Jesus came into the world to show us how to actively engage in this work of choosing salvation (that is, compassion – joyful love in action) over evil (that is, fear in its active and inactive forms). Jesus wants us to engage in salvation in both our personal and public lives.

He showed his closest friends how to look closely, listen deeply, and participate in salvation as healing encounters with others (be they well-known kin or previously unknown neighbors).

Let's hear again the brief exchange between John and members of several distinct communities. He spoke to his own community (Jews living in the surrounding area), to tax collectors (those Jews who were working for the Roman empire, so people by whom their own community felt betrayed), and Roman soldiers (on the scene to keep the peace).

As we hear John speak with each of these communities, let's wonder how his advice to them relates to our own lives. We heard,

“When the people asked him, ‘What should we do?’ John replied, ‘Let the one with two coats share with the one who has none. Let those who have food do the same.’

Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to John, ‘Teacher, what are we to do?’ John answered them, ‘Exact nothing over and above your fixed amount.’

Soldiers likewise asked, ‘What about us?’ John told them, ‘Don’t bully anyone. Don’t accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay.’”

What do you need to do in response to John's call to enact love and justice?

John challenged his own neighbors (those people who had raised him) to share their resources with one another. **I wonder: With whom could you share what you have in the way of skill, energy, or material wealth? Could you be more open to others sharing their resources with you?**

How about those tax collectors? John challenged them (the people who had a leg up socially and economically) to not abuse their advantageous position with its flimsy, temporary power by taking advantage of their neighbors' weaker position. **I wonder: toward whom with less advantage that you could you exercise more respect? Whose dignity and worth could you encourage?**

And how about those soldiers? John challenged the soldiers (the perceived enemy of his people) to not oppress those over whom they were directed to exercise rigid control. **As a mother, I wonder: If you exercise a managerial role in your home or workplace, how might you loosen your grasp – even a little bit or sometimes?**

A stone is a beautiful creation. And, from our limited human mindset, a stone generally stays right where it's sitting – inside its comfort zone. Let's not be stones. Let's rise up as children of our ancestors in faith (both the mythical figures like Sarah and Abraham and the ancestors we've known).

Let's find and immerse ourselves in moments that hold opportunities to participate in the joy of salvation – that return to the heart of God for everyone. I encourage you in the coming days of Advent to wonder: **how will I engage in salvation, how will I open myself to the process of return to the heart of God's love.** Let's be available to the cycles and also the break-through moments of the joy of salvation.

I'd like to close with words from a song called "Find Joy." My friend Lawrence Lambert wrote this song after he had an encounter with the late Maya Angelou. As you will hear in the lyrics, after getting tongue-tied and forgetting his own name, he asks her where and how to find joy.

*“Teacher, teach me the meaning of love
I need a lesson from heaven above
I wanna know why the caged bird sings
I need to know all these things*

*Teacher, point and show me the way
How do you find happiness and what must I pay?
I need your guidance, your wisdom, your grace
I want the serenity you have on your face*

*Then she said to me, You gotta look down deep
At the soil at your feet, stand still, find joy*

*Find joy in a blue sky, find joy on a mountain high
Find joy in a rising sun, find joy in everyone
Then she said to me, Son, get down on your knees
Clear your mind and pray, find joy*

*She said, Joy is all around you son
She said, Don't be scared to love someone
She said, It's in those small things we forget to see
She said, Find joy in you and me”*

Words from Lawrence Lambert.

In the coming time, may we dedicate ourselves to the pursuit of joy – both in solitude and in company. And then let’s share deep, overflowing joy because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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December 15, 2024 | Advent 3
Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:7-18, Isaiah 12:2-6