

An Advent Message: Joy

Preface:

Today we are talking about Joy.

It's our third virtue in this Advent time. It's shown up in our readings already this month. And it's basic to Advent because, of course, we are so close to celebrating Jesus' birth, and if Joy is tied to anything it's tied to celebration.

We've already talked about hope and peace, and I hope--peacefully--that we've been able to think more about these things, these great virtues--what we think they are, where in our lives we've experienced them, how we've shared them recently.

Introduction:

But we're talking about Joy today. Today may not revolutionize your entire outlook on the world, but I think that it will at least remind us that Joy is a gift, that it's something we should grab tightly to whenever it appears around us, and, too, that it's our destiny.

And because it's our goal to become more like Jesus, whose birth we're so close to rejoicing in, we'll talk about his Joy, too.

But first, let's pray.

Prayer:**Selfless:**

In some ways Joy is selfless. A person overwhelmed with joy acts like Adam & Eve before the fall, they've got no sense of shame or embarrassment at all. They will do crazy things. Shout, yell, run awkwardly toward someone. Laugh when they're embarrassed about their teeth.

They'll hug when they aren't really "into" touching people. They'll sing it on the mountain, you know? If you're full of joy, for any reason, you *forget yourself for a moment*. The ways some of us protect ourselves--being proper and quiet and deliberate--they're out the window. Joy is not self-conscious, it's selfless; or, at least, joy causes us to forget ourselves for a moment.

Plenty & Cheap:

If self-consciousness has to do with growing up, with becoming aware of the way others watch and evaluate us, so that we become self-evaluative, too, then it's probably true that it's the very young who are most joyful. But it's also the young who value joy the least.

As we get older, and become more aware of how hard life can be, how much mourning is going on in the world that we can mourn alongside, I think we simply experience Joy first-hand far less. In part because we

do become bogged down in self-evaluation, and in part because we bind our emotions to the weightiness of the world.

But we can rejoice with others far more deeply when we realize just how precious Joy is.

I mean, when we say that kids keep us young, in some ways we're just saying that they remind us the world is a place where Joy can happen. We remember that it's not all bad to not care what anyone thinks, and express whatever emotions come, and laugh about the dumbest things.

Agents:

And children can remind us that we are agents of Joy, too. We lead other people into Joy. When I was younger—I mean, pre-COVID—if you surprised me with candy or a present, oh man! All the pain of the world faded to the background of that surprise. Gifts, good surprises, miracles, promises made and kept: all these things are sources of Joy for us.

And I've grown up a little; I'm not as quickly overjoyed, you know. But I can still be led into joy by others and their good surprises, and I am all the time.

Relational:

This presence of others, this being led, is a big deal. Frankly, it's probably the case that real Joy only

happens in relationships, we are only ever really joyful because of something another person has done with our Joy as their goal. God does this all the time, acts with our Joy in mind when He acts on our behalf.

Maybe we can be contented, pleased, or happy by ourselves out in the woods looking at a mountain; but Joy seems to be something that happens especially when people gather together, even if those people are sometimes only really present to us in our memories. Even when those people are only present to us through a screen or on the other side of a window or six feet away in a driveway.

Contagious:

But even if we can experience Joy apart from other people—which I doubt, really—Joy still best happens in relationships with others, because there's something about Joy that is contagious. If we are close to or close with anyone who is experiencing joy, it's really hard not to catch some of it.

In fact, we usually have to work to stay dour and not smile when someone's really joyful and has turned our way. And of course, Paul reminds us that we are to rejoice with those who rejoice.

Which is easier said than done, for all sorts of reasons.

I mean, isn't funny how easy it can be to rejoice with

kids? They're elated, and you've got no beef joining in with them. But I think it's so easy because honestly, very few of us want to be kids or want what kids rejoice in and over.

Jealousy:

And this points out what seems to me to be the real problem we can have when it comes to rejoicing with someone: Jealousy. If you are rejoicing, just caught up in joy because of some great thing that's happened to you—but I want whatever you just got, then it takes training in our souls to keep us from jealousy and instead keep us in Joy.

We have to train for Joy. The same way we train for hope or for peace. We train for Joy. We do things that make us more likely than unlikely to catch Joy from someone else.

We do things that help us reject jealousy, like practicing gratitude and keeping long lists, mental or digital or on paper, of the way we ourselves have been blessed or the ways God's come through for us.

We do things that help us forget ourselves, like keeping our mind on God, and trying to allow the Holy Spirit to bring our attention to the way God is active in the world around us, in spite of us. We train ourselves to trust that God loves us for who we are, and no one else's reaction to us can affect that.

Sadness:

Of course, some of us have been training for or been trained by the world to expect other things, like sadness. We can feel like Joy and even Joy's more common cousins--pleasure, happiness, contentment--that these things just don't have the force that sorrow has in the world or in our lives. And there is a bit of pragmatic realism in this, right? Because the world is hard, and sadness and trouble seem to be a common denominator for us people. And every time we turn on the news or open an app we hear about fear, and anger, and disease, and death. And if we've been hurt by life, that jealous part of us wants to make sure that everyone gets the "Life's tough" message we got.

But we can't forget that Joy cuts through darkness like a light. It is a power and a miracle, and the devil hates it. Unexpected laughter kills evil. And if there is one thing that we Christians could do to empty evil of its power it would be to provide more opportunities for people to experience Joy.

And I know that many of us are doing this right now in very intentional ways. I'm thankful for that.

Impermanent:

And while there are few things more complex than sadness, and few things more straightforward than Joy, it is at least partially Joy's simplicity that gives it

the power to banish sadness for a little while in this world. Anytime there is Joy we should rejoice with it, we should drink it in. It's a rare thing; a miracle and a blessing.

But you know what I do, too often? I've shared this before. I snuff it out. Joy, excitement, wonder. Bo or Carolyn will get really excited about something, joyful about something that happens, or some news they get, or something.

And I, in sin, toss my wet-blanket self on the fire of their. I'll introduce a note of caution, a word of wisdom, or make an "I'm not sold on this" sort of face.

I'll steal the miracle that Joy is in this world--for helpful, reasonable reasons, you know. I'm not trying to be a Grinch: whether or not I'm trying, though, I become one.

Joy does many of the things hope & peace & love do: it's part of this group of things that can sometimes make no sense. We can experience them for no real good reason at all, they persist and carry us when they shouldn't. These are intrusions of good into a dark world, and we should protect them, and not discount the power or the worth of a moment of Joy in this life.

Reminder:

What we need is to drink deeply from whatever moments of Joy come our way; because Joy--when it passes into some other thing--reminds us as it fades that life is not the way it should be, and that we look forward to a life where Joy is permanent, and lasting.

Joy is our destiny. Joy that is entirely relational, because God will be with us and we will be with one another without shame and embarrassment and sorrow. Our momentary experiences of Joy in this world, which fade, can become year-long Advent reminders that what we see around us not all there is, and the world will also fade and be replaced with something better.

And this is all because of Jesus, right?

Jesus:

The author of Hebrews writes this long recitation of people of great faith in God and the troubles they have to endure. If we shouted out Old Testament folks that we could remember, we'd probably be shouting out names from this list the writer gives us: Abraham, Jacob, Moses. The famous ones, famous for their faith in God. Chapter 11 of the book. It ends like this:

“These [famously faithful people] were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only

together with us would they be made perfect.”

And the writer continues on in Chapter 12:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

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The pragmatists are right, you know? We live in a world where Joy is not universal, and whenever it comes to us we fail if we hide it under a basket or put

it out wherever we find it. But Jesus--Jesus who is on his way, whose first arrival we celebrate joyfully because it was a surprise and is a gift better than all the candy or presents in the world--Jesus knew sorrow and pain and terrible trouble.

He was a stranger in the world, strange because he wasn't stained by the world's sin and the world's brokenness, and strange because in spite of that he experienced sorrow and terror and shame.

But Jesus knew the Joy set before him, and because of it could take up all the terrible things the cross symbolizes. Jesus knew that death would not speak a final word over him, but he would triumph over it. And his resurrection, which vindicated everything he had done, also transformed every sorrow of his life with Joy.

It's the same Joy that we've been promised we'll experience, too. And I don't know if our resurrected bodies will be able to handle more joy than the ones we've got now can--I think about living joyfully all the time and it exhausts me, you know--but I do know that Joy thrives in the peace and pleasure and closeness that we'll have when God is fully with us.

First Advent:

And here's a common miracle: We don't need to wait until Jesus returns to experience Joy.

And we can't forget that if Joy will mark Jesus' return, his second advent, it just as fully marked his first. If it's true that Joy is what happens when we are surprised with a wonderful thing, then there was no greater surprise than Jesus' arrival in the world.

And everything we know about the first Christmas is that it was one of Joy. When Mary, Jesus' mother, goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant in her great old age with a son, John the Baptist, Elizabeth tells Mary "As soon as I heard the sound your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for Joy." Mary sings "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." An Angel declares to shepherds "I bring good news of great joy for all the people." And we could describe the way all those in the Christmas Story respond to Jesus with Joy.

Conclusion:

Look; the world is filled with surprises, and not all of them are wonderful. But if we rest in the presence of God we can be people who fully receive with Joy whatever good thing comes our way.

We can be people who give Joy to one another, and act as agents and ambassadors of God's delight, doing what we can to position those around us to rejoice.

We can nurture the personal relationships that Joy thrives and blooms in, and we can gather up memories of Joy for one another, and remind each other of them so that sorrow does not win in it's battle for our hearts.

We can reject all the urge that's in us to kill joy when it comes up around us, and instead, allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit who is in us, and rejoice with those who rejoice. We can train for contented gratitude, and reject jealousy. We can remember that we bring God pleasure, and his perspective really is all that matters, and so slowly wind down our self-consciousness.

In this world Joy is a gift, and we are Christ's gift-givers. This in-between time in which we live? For God's people it is one that started with Joy at Jesus' arrival, and will end in the same if we just hold the course in our faith. So rejoice! Rejoice! The Lord is come. And if Joy comes your way, hold tight to it, drink deeply of it, it is special and you are blessed. And don't destroy joy in the places you find it.