

A Bundle of Joy
Isaiah 61:1-4, 10-11
December 17, 2023

(Isa 61) The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; {2} to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; {3} to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. {4} They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

{10} I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. {11} For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

In all my years of ministry, there is something I have missed in this passage from Isaiah. I hear those words, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” and they settle on me like a weight upon my shoulders. These words evoke in me a sense of call and obligation. When Jesus began his public ministry, he preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue. He opened the scroll of the Hebrew scripture and he read these words. “God has anointed me. God has sent me,” he declares, as he claims the words of the prophet for himself. And what follows becomes his mission and purpose: to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to comfort those who mourn, to declare that God’s jubilee is now. This is how Jesus understood his life’s work.

When it came time to plan my ordination service and to affirm my call to ministry, these are the words that I chose for the scripture reading. I firmly believed, and still believe, this is the work I am called to do, not just as a minister, but as a follower of Jesus. We have a mission! We have a purpose! We are called to work for change and to advocate for those who have no power and no voice. We have a mission to serve the broken-hearted and beat down. Using whatever gifts and means available to us, we are called to be activists. And as activists we cannot turn a blind eye to oppression, injustice, poverty, and suffering – we cannot just turn off the news and tune out the suffering around us.

But when the news is so hard...that’s exactly what I want to do. When so many around me are struggling and I don’t know how to fix it, the anointing of the Spirit and the call to be a

changemaker feels like a burden too great to bear. I feel guilty for not doing enough. I feel guilty for moments of pleasure and ease. There are children in war zones, fearing for their lives and I'm shopping for batteries for my remote control.

These words of Isaiah can loom in the air like unfinished homework, reminding us of work yet to be done, work that is heavy and hard and costly. Can you feel the weight of these words?

But, what strikes me this year, however, is what I have, for too long, missed in this passage, and missed in my life – JOY. This passage from Isaiah is filled with joy. It speaks of good news, garlands instead of ashes, mantles of praise, and the oil of gladness. "With my whole being," Isaiah declares, "I will praise God."

In one hand, we have the holy calling to engage in the suffering and brokenness of the world, and in the other hand, we have...joy. What I have come to realize is that both are necessary. Joy is the antidote to despair. "Joy is the most undeniable sign of the presence of God," said French philosopher Leon Bloy (pronounced Blah). Claiming our joy is an act of holy resistance to the powers of darkness! "The joy of the Lord is our strength!" declares Nehemiah, as he directs God's people to celebrate. (Nehemiah 8:10)

Joy, joy, joy, the passage is filled with joy!

This week I listened to a podcast where Brene Brown interviewed Karen Walrond, writer, activist, and longtime friend about her book, *The Lightmaker's Manifesto: How to Work for Change without Losing Your Joy*.¹ Walrond talks about the necessity of joy. The key to cultivating that joy is a daily practice of gratitude – even on those days when we can barely get out of bed. The daily practice of gratitude draws us into the presence of God as we discipline ourselves to recognize the beauty and gifts right in front of us. Brene Brown says that her research confirms this, the most joyful people are grateful people.

Joy and happiness are not the same thing. Happiness is circumstantial. Happiness is temporal. Happiness is fleeting when the chips are down. But joy is durable and resilient. Joy is sustaining and life giving. Joy is being fully present in the moment.

One of the things Brene Brown says about joy is that it is one of our most vulnerable emotions. We often deflect it rather than experiencing it. What we too often do is brace for tragedy – we imagine that if we experience and savor joy, it will be ripped away from us. We deny our joy because we know it can't last. We kill our joy before something else does.

The apostle Paul tells us that joy is a fruit of the spirit. It is the recognition of God with us. It is a gift – waiting for us to open. It accompanies us, even as we engage the suffering and brokenness around us. It is an outward and visible sign of God's grace and presence in our lives.... There was a man that found himself stuck in away from home on business over a

¹ <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/the-lightmakers-manifesto-part-1-of-2/>

weekend. He went down to the front desk of the hotel to ask about churches in the area. The desk clerk paused for a moment and then gave the name of a specific church several blocks away. Curious the man asked, "Why that church?" To which she replied, "I'm not a church goer myself, and I don't know what they do inside, it just seems that when they leave, they are the most joyful."

Our joy is one of the most powerful witnesses we have! What kind of witness is a church full of sad sacks? Our joy is evidence that good news is spoken here! Our joy is evidence that we KNOW that God has the power to transform darkness to light and death to life. Our joy is evidence that we are not alone – God is with us – beauty is all around us!

The Dali Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu had a long conversation which became, "The Book of Joy." Both men have known suffering and known the responsibility to alleviate suffering in the world. Yet, both are joyful. The book is an attempt to explain how that is possible.

Towards the beginning, Tutu says, "Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles us rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken." (p. 12 Book of Joy)

Playwright George Bernard Shaw, had this to say about joy. "This is true joy in life: being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. The being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." If what he says is true, then our joy is evidence that we have a higher calling in this life than our own personal happiness.

In the church world there is a name for the third Sunday of advent. It is called Gaudete Sunday from the Latin word meaning "dare to rejoice." We light a rose-colored candle, and we momentarily suspend the heaviness of the Advent Season to experience joy. We dare to rejoice! We claim our joy! We celebrate that God gives to us in Jesus is not only a holy calling, but a bundle of joy.

This week, as I reflected on the theme of joy, one thing became abundantly clear. Joy is something we choose. It is a practice that brings us to life and sustains us in our call.

On this third Sunday of Advent, may we dare to rejoice. May our joy be our witness. May our joy be our strength. May our joy be infectious.