

## WHAT BRINGS YOU JOY?

Isaiah 35:1-10

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There are many reasons why our Good Neighbor Thrift Shop is having a record-breaking year for sales. One reason is the new beautifully-renovated location. Another is the amazing staff and volunteers. But part of the credit needs to also go to a woman named Marie Kondo. As you probably know, Kondo wrote a hugely popular book called The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up, which was published in the United States in 2014. Early this year, Netflix released a mini-series featuring Kondo's visits to different family homes, helping them to declutter and reorganize their belongings and their lives. After the Netflix series first came out, thrift stores across the country began reporting drop-offs like never before.

Marie Kondo's method of helping people decide what to keep and what to get rid of revolves around asking a question. She will hold up an item - a scarf, a book, a keepsake - and say to the owner: "Does this spark joy?" If it does, you keep it; if it doesn't, you get rid of it. She claims that keeping only those items that spark joy actually helps people feel a sense of wellbeing and that having fewer, more meaningful things creates an environment conducive to calm and happiness.

I have used a modified version of her method and I have to say, I think she's on to something. I have downsized twice in the last 16 years. It's always a little painful to get rid of items that have been loved, but rarely do I miss anything.

I have also thought about her philosophy in terms of the way I spend my free time. I look at items on my calendar and think, "Is that the way I really want to spend those hours,

or is there something else I could do with the precious gift of time that would be more fulfilling, more satisfying?"

About this time last year, I was asked to lead a clergy support group. I was asked by the woman who is the Association Minister of what is called the Living Water Association - the 150 UCC churches in the Cleveland-Akron general area. All of the clergy are asked to meet in a group and I was asked to be the mentor for a group of senior ministers of larger membership churches. I was reluctant at first, because I was afraid of the time commitment. I was asked to lead a group comprised of four ministers - coming from Kent, Canton, Medina and Lakewood. I was imagining a scenario that would involve a long drive, and I wasn't willing to give up one day a month. But we found a place to meet that is only a 35 minute drive for me - and I have found that I truly enjoy this half a day a month that I spend with this group. It is a commitment that brings me joy.

We had our December meeting last Thursday. I asked the members of the group to come to the meeting prepared to talk about their goals for 2020 - to set one intention that will help them in their lives as ministers. One woman said, "I want to experience more joy." She has three young children, and says, "I sometimes come home from work feeling like a real grouch. I see the house a mess and it frustrates me - I complain that my children aren't cleaning their rooms. Instead, I want to be with them. I want to get on the floor and play with them, read with and to them, make art with them. I want to let go of the things that don't matter and make time for the things that do - the things that spark joy."

Today we light the third Advent candle, the candle of joy. It is a good time to pause and reflect on the idea that God wants us to experience joy. In this season of gift-giving, think about God giving the gift of life and wanting that gift to be fully appreciated. You know how it is when you give a gift to someone you love. You select it carefully and you

watch closely as it is opened. You watch your loved one's eyes to see how that person is reacting to the gift when it is first seen. You listen for what words are said. You want, more than anything, to see delight, joy, perhaps surprise. You want your gift to be used and loved. Don't you think God is that kind of gift-giver who wants us to truly make the most of the gift of life? Life isn't meant to be endured or merely survived; life is meant to be enjoyed.

Now that doesn't mean that we were created for a life of self-indulgence, of thinking only of our own pleasures and comforts. Enjoying life, as we are meant to, means finding a way to think of others as well as ourselves. A well-balanced life is a life of service, a life that contributes, a life where we leave this world better than we found it.

Joy is not a luxury. We are meant to experience joy. Look through the gospels and see Jesus going to parties and weddings, savoring dinners at the home of friends. It was these times of leisure and relaxation, along with his times of solitude and prayer, that equipped him to give of himself at other times.

There is the lingering stereotype, perhaps a relic from our Puritan ancestors, that Christian people - religious people - shouldn't have fun. And sometimes it does seem inappropriate to talk about joy when so many people are suffering. We're aware of grief and pain among our family members and friends, and we're aware of those bearing the burden of poverty, war, displacement, and so many other global problems. Should we really be worried about what sparks joy, when there are homeless people in our county, when our shelters are full?

But here's the gospel truth. It is because we know joy and hope that we want the world to be better for all God's people. We know that life is worth living, so our planet is

worth saving. Our ability to care and make a difference for good is dependent upon our own appreciation for the beautiful miraculous gift of life.

So joy is never inappropriate.

Three of the Advent candles are purple, the same color we use during Lent, because Advent is a reminder of our need to reflect and repent, draw closer to God in a spirit of humility. But halfway through Advent here's a pink candle and this Sunday that the church has long called "Gaudete Sunday" - or Joy Sunday.

During Lent, we have forty days to focus on the meaning of Jesus' life and death, but each Sunday, Martin Luther tells us, is a "little Easter," a celebration of the resurrection. The Sundays during Lent are not part of the forty days.

So it is in Advent that this Sunday breaks forth into joy, as a reminder that no matter how bad the news seems, no matter how real the suffering is, God is still present, and God's presence brings joy.

This is our third week to read from the prophet Isaiah. Two weeks ago we were given the image of people turning their weapons of war into farming implements. Last week we were given the image of animals who usually hunt each other living peacefully together, and this week Isaiah gives us another image of abundant life and hope: the desert in full bloom. It is an image of hope and joy. And I believe we are meant to dwell on it until we embody it. Where there is God, there is joy. It doesn't mean that the pain and the problems aren't real, but it means that we can spark joy in ourselves and others, enough joy so that we are motivated to keep on caring about this broken world.

This past spring, parts of the California wilderness experienced a rare "super bloom" event that could even be seen from space. Thousands of people arrived to see it for themselves and to take pictures, and to be awed by the sight of once dusty brown hills

splattered with color upon color. When the desert blooms, it blooms abundantly. Not half-heartedly. Not hidden in some lonesome valley. For a few brilliant weeks, the world was transformed into one living Van Gogh landscape.

Certain factors coalesce that lead to a rare super bloom, including prolonged dormancy. Many wildflower seeds must remain asleep through many seasons and decide to wake up at roughly the same time after a long hibernation. The bloom is also helped by a long rainy season, followed by an unusually cold winter to lock the moisture in. Harsh, undesirable conditions over many years seem to pave the way for the stunning explosion of a super bloom.

I have known people who seem to have lived in a desert for a long time. The desert of grief, the desert of despair. One piece of bad news after another. But then, it does happen that new life appears. There is love again. There is renewed energy. There is a visible lightness to someone's step and it is beautiful to witness.

Several times I have had the pleasure of performing a marriage ceremony for two people who have found each other late in life, often after one or both of them has lost a spouse to death. It always feels like resurrection to me, and it is such a privilege to be a part of it...to see such joy, like waters springing up in the desert, as Isaiah says, "happiness and joy will overwhelm them; grief will flee away."

Friday night, Doug and I saw a play called "Every Brilliant Thing." There is only one actor on stage, who is sometimes a female and sometimes a male. The night we were there the actor was a woman. She starts by remembering herself at the age of 7 when her mother is in the hospital after a suicide attempt. This young girl begins a list, which she keeps on and off for decades, of reasons that life is worth living. It's a way of coping with

the stress of having a mother who is very ill, it's also a way for this young person to ward off depression herself. The list grows and grows; her goal is actually to get to a million. A million reasons that life is worth living.

What would be on your list? What are the small and large things that bring you joy?

If you focus on trying to notice the things that bring you joy, if you take it on as a serious assignment, well, you'll start to notice. I start my day by feeling grateful for the person who invented the timer on the coffeemaker, so that when I go downstairs, the coffee is ready. I sometimes end my day feeling grateful for the feel and smell of freshly-washed sheets. In between I think about how amazing it is that I can stay in touch with my two children via this little device...that we can just send each other little funny messages, and that it only takes a couple of seconds.

A writer in New York City takes a walk in Central Park every day with a friend. They walk in all kinds of weather, and sometimes the park is not crowded at all and they say to each other, "How could other people not appreciate this?" She goes on to write, "We see trees...looking at trees really is one of the glories of the world. They cause me to say 'Rejoice!' Trees are perfect and gorgeous and amazing. Leaves grow on trees, and birds sit on trees, and birds sing, and it's a whole beautiful package."

I hope you notice something in your world today that causes you to say, "Rejoice." I hope that you notice someone who causes you to laugh or smile. And I hope that this joy fills your spirit and reminds you that life is worth living and this planet is worth preserving and people are worth loving and saving.