

THE PROMISE OF JOY

Psalm 126
Luke 1:46b-55

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Avon Lake UCC
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(online worship only)

If you were forced, this very minute, to come up with a list of ten things that are bringing you joy right now, could you do it? How aware are you of the experience of joy, the moments of joy?

I love receiving Christmas cards from families in the church, and seeing pictures of the children of the church on social media. Both professional and amateur photographers are so creative these days in staging pictures.

But what would happen if a photographer were to follow you around your home for a week without your awareness? Would the photographer see **unstaged** moments of joy? Does your face light up when you see a certain name appear on your phone? Or when a loved one comes into the house? When you drink that first cup of coffee in the morning, do you ever take a moment just to savor it and experience it? Or are you grimacing while you drink, thinking, "This has gotta help me get through the day"?

Do you smile broadly when you listen to a favorite song?

Our purpose on earth is to be God's partners in building a better world, helping God to save the world from hatred, greed and violence, helping God heal the world from pain and brokenness. How can we live out our purpose if we don't find joy in life? If life isn't worth living, if it's not joyful, then how can we be motivated to create more abundant life for more people and even the planet itself?

Joy is essential to our purpose, to living as disciples.

A few minutes ago we saw Ben Cowles light the third Advent candle, the candle of joy. The first scripture passage Beau read is Psalm 126, a psalm that includes the word “joy” three times in one version of the Bible.

The people of Israel are remembering when they returned home after the exile - it was so wonderful, it was like a dream come true! “We were so happy,” the psalm says, “We couldn’t stop laughing and singing.” They were thankful to God and full of joy.

They repeat that story; they continually express their gratitude to God for all that God has done in the past. And then, in full confidence, they ask God for what they need. Beau read from the Message version of the Bible which says, “And now, God, do it again”...when our lives feel like they are as bone-dry as the desert, bring your presence like raindrops. When we’re tired and weary, when life has worn us down, help us to experience joy again.

If you can’t come up with a list of ten things that are bringing you joy right now - if you just can’t - then try this exercise. Think of ten times in your life when you have felt joy. It doesn’t have to be the big moments, like weddings or births. It might be a walk on a perfectly beautiful fall day. Or a conversation in which you and the other person really “clicked”, each of you listening deeply to the other.

How about moments we have experienced collectively? Many of you have been in this sanctuary when we have commissioned our mission trip participants in the summer - and there are sometimes over 100 senior high youth and adults standing up on this chancel; it’s a moment of joy. Think of the delight we have felt at the children on the steps for Children’s Time. Our musicians present something beautiful here in God’s

presence and we spontaneously clap. We announce the results of a food drive and there is a ripple of excitement through the pews. I will never forget the first time we worshiped under this roof. We have experienced moments of joy and laughter in this sacred space. The psalmist says, "It was like a dream, too good to be true...we laughed, we sang, we couldn't believe our good fortune. God was wonderful to us; we are one happy people. And now, God, do it again". We say it with full confidence. The God who has brought us to this place is with us, even now, and we **will** once again be here not just in spirit but in body and we will laugh and sing and express our gratitude. The thought of what that day will be like brings me joy.

It's been a couple of hard and sad weeks for my family as we have said goodbye to my mom. My mom developed aphasia about two years ago and her speech became more and more halting and slow in that time until she was finally almost unable to speak at all. My mom and I used to love talking on the phone; she was a real conversationalist. So my relationship with her changed dramatically when she lost her ability to speak, and I have been grieving her loss in small pieces during the past two years. In the midst of this stage of my grief this week, I had a bit of a strange thing happen. I discovered a new Christmas song, new to me, that is, from an Americana folk group - it has a very catchy pop sound to it, and I found myself playing it over and over. The song brings me joy. The music is fun but the lyrics are working on my heart and soul - they are healing me in a way I need to be healed. First, the song, which was released in 2008, sounds like it could have been written in 2020. The song begins, "So it's been a long year, Every new day brings one more tear, Till there's nothing left to cry".

Then there's this verse: "Tear these thorns from my heart, help the healing to start." I know I'm not the only one whose heart needs healing right about now.

And one more line from the song: "Snow is falling, falling like forgiveness from the sky."

If you are having trouble experiencing joy, could it be that something is blocking you? Something, perhaps, like your need to forgive yourself or someone else?

Practicing forgiveness and gratitude leads us towards joy. And so does something else very simple: paying attention. When we are able to slow down, turn off the distractions, live in the present moment, and notice what and who are around us, we will find ourselves feeling more joyful. The writer Mary Oliver loved the natural world and she would spend hours looking at things like a grasshopper on a blade of grass. She explored every inch of the woods near her home and the more she looked the more she found that caused her to wonder and marvel. She has a poem in which she talks about diving into the world, fully aware of all that is around us, and in that poem she writes this line, "Listen, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?" Are we just surviving or are we savoring the joy God intends for us?

On this third Sunday in Advent, as we light the candle of joy, which is sometimes called the Mary candle, we also remember the song or poem called The Magnificat, the song Mary sings while she's pregnant, while she's visiting in the home of Elizabeth. The Magnificat is no lullaby. It's not a song that would put anyone to sleep; it's meant, in fact, to wake us up. It's a job description for the child Mary is carrying. It's a way of saying to him, and to us, "This is who you are. You come from a God who believes that the world is worth saving, the world is worth loving, the world is worth healing. But that

job is not going to be easy. In fact, it's going to involve shaking up everything about the status quo."

The people of Israel thought the Messiah would be a powerful person - politically connected, or wealthy, or from a prominent religious family. But God turns that expectation upside down. Jesus is born to a poor family, part of the oppressed class in a time of military occupation.

And what will this Jesus do? He will shake up people who are proud, people who think that their accomplishments and status make them better than others.

He'll notice poor people much more often than he'll pay attention to rich people.

He is going to surprise people because of the folks he hangs out with, shock people because of those he touches and heals, and scandalize people when they see who his dinner companions are. He'll heal on the Sabbath when that's what love propels him to do.

Mary's song describes all of this. It's a song that helps us imagine a better world, a world where all people are fed, all people have a home, all people are treated with justice and compassion. Joy on a grand scale because it is joy for all.

That is the world we are called to help God build, and our motivation comes from the small moments of joy. They're all around us this season, yes even this year. That Christmas card with a few personal words that show that someone really sees you, knows you. That song that you want to play over and over again. An unexpected sunny afternoon. The news that a vaccine is coming...I heard one public health official say last week that the rapid creation and production of this vaccine is the greatest

scientific accomplishment in our lifetimes. In our lifetimes! If that's not a reason for joy, I don't know what is.

These moments of joy wake us up. They remind us that we are truly alive, that life is worth living and saving, and then we ask ourselves, "Why aren't I more joyful, more often?" Well, this is why - because there is so much pain in the world. We can try to avoid the news, we can try to cocoon ourselves in our homes, but God nudges us. That person who looks to be homeless who stands at the corner of W. 117th St. and I-90, there with a sign in his hand - I see him every time I go to visit my daughter and son-in-law. He reminds me that Mary's song still needs to be sung. As long as there are refugee camps and food pantries, Mary's song still needs to be sung. When we see that the pandemic has created almost a trillion dollars for U.S. billionaires while 40 million Americans have filed for unemployment, we know that the agenda Mary sings about is far from complete.

Joy comes to us when we hear this song as a call to action. We start with a deep awareness that life is good, that life is worth living, that this world is worth saving and all God's people are worth loving, and then we follow God's nudges. We volunteer, we make food, we notice our neighbors who live alone, we call our senators, we donate, we speak up against bigotry and all forms of hatred. There are a hundred different ways to make a difference for good. While we work together towards that day when all God's people have the basic necessities of life, when joy will be complete, we find that the work itself brings joy and brings us closer to God.

May it be so for each of you. Amen.