

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
15 December 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Third Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Joy-Full Living”

Part of the Annual theme, *Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD*
Touchstone words in Advent: WAIT and CULTIVATE

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Today our Ukranian friends, Natasha & Ivan Shevchenko, lit the Advent Candle of Joy. Their witness—lighting a candle of Joy when their people, their family and their country is suffering so deeply, when their own hearts are breaking and their fears of their children and grandchildren going in and out of bomb shelters keep them awake at night—is such a powerful testimony.

We do not wait for “life to be all good” to proclaim that the Good News is Joyful. We don not wait until we “feel happy” to cultivate room for Joy in our lives. Yet, we cannot just manufacture Joy on a whim or conjure it up with the right mix of ingredients. It is a gift.

In the autobiography of his early life, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis wrote, “*All Joy reminds.*

It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be'.”¹ Joy surprises and sustains.

The Candle of Joy is also called the Shepherd’s candle, for in the Christmas Story as told by Luke, the Shepherds—those on the edge of society who did not have much money, who were often alone with their sheep, wandering from one grassy area to the next, away from family, friends, and home—these nomads, these Shepherds are the very first ones to receive the Good News from the angels: “*Do not be afraid, for I bring you Good News that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah the Lord,*” (Luke 2:10-11). The Shepherds, of course, go off to Bethlehem and

¹ C.S. Lewis, quote accessed on Dec. 15, 2024 at <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/877675-surprised-by-joy-the-shape-of-my-early-life>.

find Joseph and Mary and the baby wrapped in cloths—Pure Joy—lying in a manger and then what do they do? They “*go and tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere,*” glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

The Shepherds were Emissaries of Joy. They were on a special mission, not one they chose, but one they were receptive to and ready for. The message of joy they received from the angels just “happened” upon them in the night. They did nothing to deserve it, they didn’t go looking for it. The Joy came to them. However, they had eyes to see and hearts to believe, and minds curious enough to wonder, “*Let us go see this thing that has been made known to us...*” (Luke 2:15).

Now before this Big Moment in their life, I imagine that the Shepherds did a whole lot of waiting. Standing around waiting for the sheep to finish grazing in one pasture before going to another. Waiting around for a stray sheep or two to get with the program and move along with the others. Waiting up at night to keep watch over their flocks, keeping predators at bay. Waiting with

their thoughts, in solitude. But it seems in that Waiting, they were Cultivating something. We do not get a sense from Scripture that the Shepherds had some kind of special depth of faith or mysticalness about them that allowed them to create this moment of Joy with the angelic hosts in the sky. No, the Shepherds were ordinary folks, the most ordinary of ordinary, but perhaps what allowed them to hear the angelic hosts was that they had Cultivated—within themselves—a readiness to receive the unexpected and an openness of mind and heart to hear something beyond believing.

In other words, they had space in their lives for Joy to surprise them and for it to sink in and linger.

I do love the theology that says the Shepherds, with their humble and lowly stature, are the first ones that were chosen to receive the Good News very intentionally. But you know, I can also just as easily imagine that the angelic hosts and the special messenger angel with the glory of God shining around her, had maybe been trying to make this announcement to other folks that night—flapping their wings and singing their

hearts out above villages—and that they gave up because people were distracted with their heads down in their smart phones, too busy to look up and see them hovering and shining in the night sky above, too isolated with their air pods in, unable to hear any kind of heavenly host singing, “*Gloria, in excelsis deo.*” I can imagine a world where the angels had been trying to share their Joy with others all around the villages, and eventually found themselves in the fields, above the sheep and a few lowly shepherds, where things were a bit quieter, a bit less hectic, a bit more spacious.

It is interesting to ponder if sometimes we miss out on Joy not because it is *not* there, but because we are too distracted or consumed with worry or something else in our life to see it or experience it.

I wonder if we can cultivate a readiness to receive Joy when it comes—to create an openness within our hearts and minds that will notice it and hang on to it a bit longer when it happens upon us. Something tells me the Shepherds had been cultivating an attention toward the sky and the stars and mystery for many a

long night before that wonder-filled Eve of the first Christmas.

And sometimes, I think, cultivating a readiness to receive Joy simply means NOT allowing the circumstances of our lives to cloud out the Joy that is hovering around us.

I certainly have been learning this lesson a lot over the past couple of year, as it’s been tempting to let external circumstances steal my joy!

As I shared with you all a few weeks ago, I’m involved in a legal situation that has been going on for years...and the back and forth of the litigation has felt all consuming at times. And as any of you who are in the legal profession know—or if you’ve been involved in litigation yourself you know—that the “waiting” of it all is excruciating! Sometimes it feels like all you are doing is waiting. Waiting on an attorney to file a claim or judgement or motion, waiting on the other attorney to respond to that same claim or judgment or motion. Waiting on a judge to rule on a motion. Waiting on a deposition to be scheduled, or the transcript to be sent. You’re just waiting and waiting and waiting, and it’s so frustrating because you’re

waiting on other people to do something that affects *your life!*

It's a complete surrender of control and it is maddening. And you, full confessional here: I used to not think of myself as a controlling person, but my lack of control in this situation has made me think otherwise! Even now, I've been surprised by how—in all this waiting—if I'm not careful, the waiting can lead to a situation where my emotions or mental state are too tightly connected to a certain outcome. The court rules in favor of our side? I'm elated and hopeful and on Cloud 9. The court rules in favor of the other side? I'm disheartened and worried and in a fog.

Do you see what's happening here? I'm giving control over the courts for things in my life they need not have control over! Like my ability to mental and spiritual health...and like...my experience joy!

In all of this seemingly unending waiting, I have learned that I may not be able to control the litigation, but I can cultivate a detachment to outcome, and in so doing, a greater attachment to the Divine...to the presence and nearness of God. To the presence of possibility. I can

leave room to be surprised by Joy (in big ways and small), even in the midst of a not-joyful experience.

Day by day I'm learning that cultivating room for joy in the "waiting" does not mean curing anything or controlling anything...it just means NOT letting "This Circumstance" crowd out joy, or cloud over the sun. Even on cloudy days, the sun is shining and it just takes a slight wind to move a cloud a bit for a ray of light to shine down and surprise. So it is with joy.

In a sermon on the difference between joy and happiness, Rev. Rebecca Bryan writes: "How does one define happiness? Surely that definition unique to each individual. For some of us it may be letting loose and having fun. For others it is laughter and glee. Still others call themselves happy when they are at rest, free of obligations, or left alone to read their books. It all depends. Joy, on the other hand, shares similarities between people as it is less about what *"I" like* and more about how *I experience* the world. It often comes as a gift or a moment of grace, often at the least expected, and

sometimes most needed, of times.”²

“In his book *The Second Mountain*, David Brooks defines happiness as having to do with an achievement or success and [or something that is] inherently is centered around self...Joy, on the other hand, transcends the self and includes connection and relationship with others. Brooks also claims that while happiness is apt to be fleeting, joy can become a way of being or an orientation in life. ‘Joy is a richer and fuller state beyond happiness.... We are pleased by happiness, but we are transformed by Joy. When we experience joy we often feel we have glimpsed into a deeper and truer level of reality.’”³

“In other words, joy cannot be dependent on external conditions. We can, of course, experience joy in response to things outside of ourselves, as when we see a beautiful sunset or reach out to someone in need. However, if we make joy contingent on external conditions, we are destined to be disappointed.”⁴

² Rev. Rebecca Bryan, “Joy: Evidence of the Divine,” *First Religious Society: Unitarian Universalist: Sermons* (2 June 2019), accessed on Dec. 15, 2024 at <https://www.frsuu.org/sermons/joy-divine/>.

³ Bryan, *ibid.*

One of the mysteries of Joy is that it is most clearly experienced sometimes in seasons of great suffering. Why is this? Why do we need to suffer in order to see what is most important so clearly, in order to not take for granted what we otherwise would? Barbara Holmes describes this phenomenon in the lives of black people in her book *Joy Unspeakable*:

*“Joy Unspeakable erupts when you least expect it, when the burden is greatest, when the hope is gone after bullets fly. It rises on the crest of impossibility, it sways to the rhythm of steadfast hearts, and celebrates what we cannot see.”*⁵

In this way, Joy is like Hope. It must be cultivated—it doesn’t come easily. But, it’s also true that Joy doesn’t need Life to be Easy in order for it to come and surprise us.

As Anne Morrow Lindbergh says, “*For happiness one needs security, but joy can spring like*

⁴ Bryan, *ibid.*

⁵ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, p. 200, accessed on Dec. 15, 2024 at <https://inwardoutward.org/joy-unspeakable-sept-15-2022/>.

a flower even from the cliffs of despair.”⁶

This is the kind of joy about which the Apostle Paul writes: *“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Do not be anxious...the Lord is near...”* (Phil. 4:4-6).

Paul’s letter to the Philippians was written while he was in prison. He was jailed more than once in his career. But one of those incidents actually took place in Philippi. His readers would certainly remember the event when Paul was “publicly tortured, chained, and thrown into the Roman version of a super-max prison.”⁷

The point being: Paul is not saying *“rejoice in the Lord always”* while he’s playing with puppies and gazing at rainbows. He is NOT rejoicing in his *circumstances*. He is rejoicing *in the Lord*, who is WITH HIM *in his circumstances*. And that makes all the difference.

As the Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians, who are a suffering people, he calls them

to Joy even as they are being distracted by false teachers and are experiencing internal division and external threats. They have opponents that are causing them suffering, whether physical or social, and Paul worries it is dividing them (1:28). There are other teachers trying to win their affections while Paul is in prison, and he’s worried they’ll start reverting back to the distinctions of Jew and Gentile that caused hatred and exclusion (3:2-11). And, to top it off, in the midst of all this, the two leaders within the community who are supposed to be unifying, are at odds with one another, and people are taking sides, threatening the strength of the community (4:2).

So, “when Paul’s letter saying *‘Rejoice in the Lord always,’* arrives in an ancient Macedonian living room, it was not a tranquil and untroubled community who read his words...They are glad to have a note from Paul, their founder and leader, but they must wonder if perhaps their rejoicing needs to wait for happier times. *“Rejoice, always? Really? Do you know what is going on*

⁶ Bryan, *ibid*.

⁷ Diana Butler Bass, “Sunday Musings: Advent 3: Maybe a Red Candle this year...?” *The Cottage* (15 Dec.

2024), accessed on Dec. 15, 2024 at dianabutlerbass@substack.com.

Paul? Do you know what [our] life is like?''⁸

Well, Paul may not know *exactly* what they are going through but he knows well enough what life is like when all is not well. It's no accident that Paul explains his own hardships in such detail at the beginning of his letter. He offers his friends the example of his own life, and says rejoicing cannot wait until life is good. Rejoicing happens in celebration *and* in suffering because joy is related to the presence of God in our lives, not the absence of suffering. Joy is NOT related to the *absence* of suffering; it's related to the *presence* of God. Again, we rejoice in the Lord, not in our circumstances. Or said a different way, we do not rejoice in our circumstances, we rejoice in the Lord who is with us (Emmanuel) IN our circumstances.

Remember Paul and Silas singing in prison in Acts 16? They show us that our circumstances need not silence our song.

Our circumstances cannot silence our song, but they may

make it hard to find the melody for a while. And that's okay. Give yourself grace. The point Paul is making is that God did not abandon Jesus and God will not abandon us: "*The Lord is near.*" This is the Good News of Christmas, the Joy which happened upon the Shepherds, the Joy they shared with the world. That in the tiny frame of a baby, in the dependent needs of an infant, we learn what it means to need one another. Jesus could not make it in the world without his mom and dad caring for him. And as he grows older, he teaches us that we cannot make it in the world if we do not care for one another.

Paul reminds the Philippians how much he needs *them* and how *they* need *each other*. The letter is all about "koinonia," a fellowship of common cause that creates the space for joy to be experienced through the witness and testimony of how joy is experienced in each other's lives. Part of living a joy-full life is experiencing joy ourselves; another part (perhaps a greater part!) is seeing joy and celebrating it in others!

⁸ Allen Hilton, "Philippians 4:4-7: Exegetical Perspective," eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised*

Common Lectionary Year C Volume I Advent through Transfiguration (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, pg 65.

We see this same call to Joy within a community from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah writes this hymn of praise in chapter 12 as his people live under oppressive powers and long for a return home from exile. In their waiting between the Now and Not Yet, he calls them to Joy. “These words were spoken by the prophet Isaiah to the people of Judah and Jerusalem more than twenty seven hundred years ago, when the Assyrian Empire was the dominant power, and Judah lived in the shadow of its might. Foreign invaders, political instability, and crises of one kind or another [are] context of Isaiah’s words. The people to whom he was sent and those for whom this book was originally composed lived in a world that was unpredictable and out of their control.”⁹ Much like the Palestinian people today, they did not know when occupation would end, or when they could return to their homes, if their homes would even be left to return to, or even if they were, if they themselves would be alive to return. Yet Isaiah calls them to Joy through this hymn of praise.

⁹ Audrey West, “Commentary on Isaiah 12:2-6,” *Working Preacher* (13 Dec. 2009), accessed on Dec. 15, 2024 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise->

Isaiah reminds them to stand in the midst of circumstances of suffering and say, “*even though this horrible situation is affecting me in every way imaginable, I will not let you steal my joy.*” Joy is the song of liberation when the oppressor seeks to silence you. And—it’s communal. So when you forget the melody or can’t find the pitch of Joy, someone else in the community can hum it in your ear.

Did you notice how Isaiah’s hymn goes from first person singular to second person plural?¹⁰

What Isaiah knows for himself, he wants his community to proclaim with a collective voice: “*I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord is my strength and might...AND...you will say give thanks to the Lord, sing praises, shout aloud, and sing for joy. Draw water from the wells of salvation (of healing) with Joy.*”

In Isaiah 12, we see that “no longer is there a lone voice singing out against fear, as though whistling in the dark, but rather a chorus of voices

[common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-isaiah-122-6-2](https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-isaiah-122-6-2).

¹⁰ West, *ibid.*

offering praise for all that the Lord has done. *“Make known his deeds among the nations, they will sing, and “[the Lord] has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth”* (vs 4-5).

This reminder of past experience with God, how the Lord has already acted for the benefit of God’s people, is a strong defense against the grip of fear. So, also, is our association with a community of faith that witnesses to God’s [presence]. How much easier it is to “trust and not be afraid” when a *whole community* is present to join together in the refrain!”¹¹

In our circumstances of pain and suffering, we do not wait without the possibility of joy. We cultivate a yearning for the nearness of God. We open our hearts and minds to be surprised by goodness, to be aware of the ordinary blessings that surround us. In our Advent waiting, perhaps the lesson for us today is that we do not have to wait for hard times to be over to experience Joy. Joy can come, and will come, in unexpected ways and places. And when it does, may we let it sink in.

While we cannot control Joy, we can control our ability to allow its effects to linger in our lives, creating a lasting impact. Indeed, to live a Joy-full (F-U-L-L) life is to live a life that is aware of the fullness of God’s nearness, and in so doing, to cultivate a state of mind and heart that can be “surprised by joy,” as C.S. Lewis would say. It does not mean our days will be full of such Joy-filled moments all the time, but rather like the Shepherds, *when we have a moment of Joy*, we allow that moment to be a wellspring that pours into the rest of our lives, so that we go from *“Let us go see what this thing is that the angels are singing about,”* TO *“Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere!”*

I have no doubt that the Shepherds each had circumstances beyond their control hovering above them that Christmas Eve night, but such clouds were not so heavy that Joy did not break through.

And I’m sure there was a shepherd that night who could not hear the song or feel its joy, but he followed his friends anyway...all the way to Bethlehem...and perhaps a

¹¹ West, *ibid.*

second chance to experience joy
as he delighted in the animals
surrounding a baby in a manger.

If this shepherd is you, unable to
find your song this season,
know that it is enough to let
others sing for you this
Christmas. The truth of “Joy to
the World the Lord is come”
does not depend upon your
voice alone, but know that as
you hear it sung by others, it
will begin to hum within you
too. Slowly and
surely...surprisingly...and joy-
fully.

Amen.