

MESSAGE: 13 December 2020, Advent III – the Sunday of JOY
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB - Rev Greg Wooley

Today is the third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of JOY.

Watch at <https://youtu.be/xAmhdJfNHBk>

Each year, this Sunday arrives, with its special pink candle signifying a break from the darker hues of pensive blue or penitential purple. And every year I draw just a bit of a blank for JOY can be a rather distant word for folks like me who have journeyed with depression over many decades. Words like pleasant, satisfying and enjoyable, I find easy to relate to, and I couldn't possibly be part of my Mother's family and not have a good sense of humour. But once we move into words like happiness and joy, particularly joy, welllll, that's a journey into less-familiar territory. And as I hear many of you sharing your disappointment at our coronavirus-mandated separation from friends and family and Christmas travels, joy may be a bit of a reach.

But Joy is a real thing – a good thing – a soulful thing – and it needs to be talked up and celebrated. As a starting point for this week's message, I decided I should get a good solid definition for joy, especially since there is that whole range of "good feeling" emotion words, all the way from pleased to elated.

All of the authors I consulted, wanted to draw a distinction between joy, and happiness. Some, such as Ian Bogost of the Atlantic magazine, saw joy as the momentary high peaks and happiness as an ongoing enjoyable baseline, while the majority of voices I consulted saw happiness as more fleeting and joy as the bedrock. I like what social science student Avery Rogers had to say: "happiness is often described as a reaction to external events that make you feel pleasant, excited, jubilant, etc., while joy is an abiding sense of wellbeing [and] satisfaction...that is independent of external events and arises from your own degree of inner peace and 'enlightenment.'"

For our purposes this morning, I'm going to stick with her framework, that joy is the abiding sense of wellbeing. Joy is something that stays in place, even when the external circumstances are hard. Joy can be increased by positive external events, to be sure, especially the ending of a time of difficulty or pain, but at its heart, joy is something we cultivate, treasure, and regard with gratitude.

Four years ago, two bearers of this kind of joy got together with an author. The author was Douglas Abrams, the two joy-bearers were Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, and the book was entitled *The Book of Joy*.

The book is based on the conversations of these two friends over the course of a week. To give you a sense of how it goes, here are four brief quotes:

- From the Dalai Lama: “There are going to be frustrations in life. The question is not: How do I escape? It is: How can I use this as something positive?”
- From Archbishop Tutu: ““Much depends on your attitude. If you are filled with negative judgment and anger, then you will feel separate from other people. You will feel lonely. But if you have an open heart and are filled with trust and friendship, even if you are physically alone, even living a hermit’s life, you will never feel lonely.”
- From the Dalai Lama: “Something is lacking. As one of the seven billion human beings, I believe everyone has the responsibility to develop a happier world. We need, ultimately, to have a greater concern for others’ well-being. In other words, kindness or compassion, which is lacking now. We must pay more attention to our inner values. We must look inside.”
- From Archbishop Tutu: “We are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy.”

As I hear these reflections, joy enters my heart, the kind of joy that draws from a well-rooted spirituality, engages with the human condition, and reaches out in love. The kind of joy that comes, not from individuality but from collective connection and true concern for all living beings. The kind of joy that is fed, not from adulation or achievement, but from vulnerability and compassion and selfless love. The kind of joy that is tested and wounded, and from that, finds a resilience that engenders new joy. And as I read their words, I can picture them: Desmond Tutu’s smile, the kindness in the Dalai Lama’s eyes, and it draws me much closer to this somewhat elusive word named Joy.

And when I pause to think about it, it is not only world-renowned spiritual leaders who exude and spread joy. Over the years I have had the great privilege of meeting any number of people who are the absolute embodiment of joy. While Ministry does bring you alongside people in their hardest times, it also exposes you to people who joyfully draw from a very deep spiritual well. In some cases they are outwardly happy, smiling people, in other cases not so much, but regardless of how it sits with them, they have a deep contentment and joy which draws me into a similar space. I bring to mind a relative who was calm, quiet, introspective, but whose entire face opened up in a smile each time they mentioned someone’s name. I bring to mind a gentleman who, no matter what the topic, would always turn the conversation back to how I was doing, who viewed even the most complex issues with deep concern for the people most impacted. I bring to mind a parishioner whose profound physical struggles and lingering pain never diminished her graciousness or her love for the world around her, whose experience of want fifty years earlier made her very wise and not at all bitter. I bring to mind a co-worker from my teenage years who is perhaps the happiest, most bubbly person I have ever encountered; about six months into our friendship, I learned that she was shunned by her parents when she was an

adolescent. She carried that pain deep within her but also a knowledge that God's assessment of her as beloved, was right, and her parents' assessment of her was dead wrong.

One of the wonderful things I see in all this – in reading the words of Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama, and in remembering the joy-bringers that I have been blessed to know – is that joy is something that develops, not from seeking joy or acquiring things that will bring joy, but by investing oneself in the life of the world and the love of our neighbours. Much of the joy these people embody has been forged in times of challenge. Jesus (in Matthew 16:25) spoke of “taking up our cross” and following him - revealing the power of letting go of our ego-driven needs, and finding true fulfillment. If my life's goal is to focus on my own need to be happy, to find joy, chances are it will be elusive; but if I approach life with grace and generosity and a desire to serve and welcome and love, then joy is much more likely to bloom – in me, in others, in my community.

I may not identify it as a constant companion, but JOY has made an impact on my life, through the gifts of family life and enjoyable pastimes and particularly uplifting Church moments, through the lives of globally-recognizable figures, and through the lives of everyday saints who have enriched my life beyond measure. In closing, I invite you to reflect on your life's story: Who are the public figures who have brought joy to you? Who are the people in your life's journey who have exhibited a joy that may have been forged in hardship, but who improve your day just by thinking about them? What are the gifts that God has placed in your life – things you enjoy doing, ideas you enjoy pondering? If you wish, the end of this message might be a good time to pause the video, and open your heart to these bearers of joy, past and present, each breath expressing gratitude to them and to God's ever-present love which has worked through them. There is joy in easy-flowing times, and there is joy in these days of desert and distancing. In all times and circumstances, may joy abound in your life and in the life of the world. Amen.

References cited:

Adams, Douglas Carlton with Dalai Lama XIV and Desmond Tutu. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*. NYC: Viking, 2016.

Bogost, Ian. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/06/why-joy-better-happiness/592735/>

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SCRIPTURE PREFACE for December 13th – Luke 1: 5-25

On this Third Sunday of Advent, the scripture lesson I have chosen is the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah from the 1st chapter of Luke. This isn't the lectionary reading for this Sunday, in fact, most of this reading doesn't show up at all in our three-year table of lessons.

But I chose this reading for the Sunday of Joy, because the joy in this story comes the way that joy often comes: as an unexpected gift that blossoms in the aridness of hardship.

As you hear this reading, listen for the simplicity of how Luke describes Elizabeth and Zechariah: blameless, and childless. In so doing, Luke steps away from the common blaming, shaming and mutterings about "divine punishment" that would have been a feature of community life for this couple-without-descendants.

Listen also for echoes of earlier stories in scripture, as Elizabeth's long prayed-for but by now totally-unexpected pregnancy ties her to women like Sarah and Hannah, who were similarly blessed later in life.

Next Sunday, we will hear of Elizabeth's soul connection to her young kinswoman Mary, as they share dreams of the intertwined future of their children: Elizabeth's son John, who will change people's hearts and open them to the path of Shalom, and Mary's son Jesus, who will walk that path with them.

This is a story of hopeful prayer, and surprising news, and Zechariah's momentary lapse of faith, and Elizabeth's embodiment of the holy gift of future-looking joy. Thanks be to God, Amen.