

***Do Not Be Afraid: #morejoy***  
***Matthew 1:18-25***  
***December 13, 2020***

Joy is the word of the day, the candle of the day. The third Sunday of Advent is called “Gaudete” Sunday. “Gaudete” is the Latin word for “Rejoice.” Each Sunday in the season of Advent is supposed to be a feast day, a celebration, but this week especially so. The third week of Advent is a time of joy, a time of being thankful for all that has been given – the promise of the Savior who has come, who is present, and who promises a return. This is a day to peel away the penitential mood of Advent, and rejoice in the Lord always!

But we are in the midst of a global pandemic that is not only a public health crisis but is also an economic crisis leaving millions unemployed, small business on the brink of collapse, and thousands on the verge of being evicted. People around the world are grieving the loss of over 1.5 million lives. It seems insensitive to proclaim joy in the face of so much anguish and grief.

How do we claim joy in the face of such devastation? Can we justify “Rejoicing in the Lord always” in the midst of a global crisis? How does today’s scripture, which doesn’t even mention joy, guide us?

The Gospel of Matthew focuses on Joseph’s experience of the birth of Jesus. Joseph has heard of the scandalous pregnancy of his betrothed, Mary. He cares for Mary and does not want to add to her disgrace, so he decides to divorce her quietly. It only requires a written document and competent witnesses. With his decision made, Joseph sleeps on it before enacting it the next day. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream, which may be a good thing. If Joseph was not already in a prone position, the news declared by the angel might have knocked him off his feet. The messenger of God responds to Joseph’s decision. “Do not be afraid. Take Mary as your wife as planned. Her son is from the Holy Spirit, and to be named Jesus, for he will save people from their sins.” This message from the angel prompts Joseph to change his mind, take Mary as his wife, and raise Jesus as his son.

Joseph chose to believe the angel messenger that all would go well and he could go with the flow on this one. He stays present to Mary instead of giving in to the worry of what might happen, including the disgrace and scorn of their community. He opts to participate in the new, mysterious thing that God is doing in Mary’s life for the salvation of God’s people.

The opposite of Joy that derives from fear is worry. Worry is the illusion that somehow we can prevent tomorrow's heartache. When we live in worry, we do not live in the present, but our minds keep us focused on an unknown future. We often miss the joy of what is happening right now and miss opportunities to be fully present to others with our attention and support.

Joseph could allow fear to prevent him from responding to God's plan. He could "awfulize" about all the things that can go wrong and walk away. In submitting to God's plan, he chooses to be vulnerable. In his vulnerability,© he doesn't give in to fear, anxiety, and shame. Joseph recognizes, as Brene Brown says, that vulnerability is also the birthplace of joy, love, belonging, creativity, and faith. The risk Joseph takes can lead to joy or worry, to great delight or misery. In reality, his choice leads to all: joy and worry, delight and misery – all elements of the fullness of life. But if he does not take the risk, he would miss out on joy, the joy of knowing, loving, and raising Jesus. The delight of being Jesus' earthly father fills up Joseph's reservoir with joy and love, and energizes him for those times when difficult things happen. Joseph says, "Yes," to God's call, knowing that it will not always be easy, but he is willing to suffer the challenges in order to experience the joy.

The reality is that life is a mixture of joy and sorrow, ecstasy and agony. As the preacher of Ecclesiastes says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die;...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (3:1, 2a, 4). There are times, such as this time, in which we do both – weep and laugh, mourn and dance. That is the fullness of life. Living through grief does not exclude the opportunity for joy.

I hope that you've had a chance to see the online art exhibit by a local artist, Susan Cornelius. You can find a link to the exhibit on our church webpage.<sup>i</sup> Susan is a volunteer at The Living Room, a day center for unsheltered and at-risk women and children. As Susan came to know the women, they allowed her to paint their portraits and tell their stories. Their stories are touching, sharing real life experiences of dehumanization and trauma. And yet, their stories include deep gratitude, even joy, for the support they have received and hope for their future.

Vivan is a trans woman from Montana. She said, "Growing up I wasn't good enough for anyone, except my grandparents who I lived with for a while....Because of addictive behaviors, I lost my way, stepped away from my family. I am a chef – learned farm to table cooking on a farm with my

grandparents. Now I'm working on a cookbook and have plans for two food trucks of my own." Meditation and transitional housing have been helpful in dealing with her mental health issues. Although she has been through extremely rough experiences, I sense joy in Vivan's story – joy in cooking and the dream of sharing her gift with others. Perhaps the joy is richer because the pain has been so deep.

Describing a period in his career when his health was bad and his spirits low, filmmaker Ingmar Bergman confessed to a friend, "I'm about to lose my joy. I can feel it physically. It's running out. I'm just drying up, inside." Bergman recalled how Johann Sebastian Bach discovered that his wife and two of their children had died while he was away on a trip. In a diary Bach wrote, "Dear Lord, may my joy not leave me." In his autobiography, Bergman wrote: "All through my conscious life, I...lived with what Bach calls his joy. It...carried me through crisis and misery and functioned as faithfully as my heart, sometimes overwhelming and difficult to handle, but never antagonistic or destructive. Bach called this state his joy, a joy in God."

James Walls says, "To lose one's joy is to lose one's soul. Our existence is too crowded with burdensome tasks and unexpected setbacks for us to assume that alone we can overcome what confronts us. Bach's experience of joy continues with us through his music. Bergman's constant struggle between the experience of grace and despair is permanently available in his films. Both Bach and Bergman testify that holding on to joy is no easy assignment. But without joy, the ability to connect with the ultimate, we are left with only the hollow certainty of measured reality."<sup>ii</sup>

The angel instructs Joseph not to be afraid, for God will weave a thread of joy even through the challenges of Jesus' life. There are many losses to grieve in the face of this pandemic, and yet people are finding creative ways to claim joy. The joy does not discount the suffering of so many, but a glimpse of joy mingled with despair connects us with God who comes to be one with us through it all.

We will be surprised to find joy in the strangest places, as did Sam. When Sam was 3 years old he attended the Little School of Seattle. Which met in the basement of a church. And kept its general supplies in the foyer of the women's restroom. Sam discovered this treasure trove one morning late in November. Therein was a king-sized canister full of red glitter. Yes. Upside down over his head. All over the restroom. And down the hall and around the corner and into the Director's office. But before anyone could mutter oh-my-god-what-a-mess,

Sam, 3, sang out – hand in the air, laughter on face, “You know what? YOU KNOW WHAT! There’s CHRISTMAS in the BATHROOM!”

There’s Christmas in the bathroom. And therein lies the message. Beauty, so said the ancients, is in the eye of the beholder. And Christmas is and ever will be found where it’s looked for. Most often close by, most always underfoot. Hidden away in the cupboards of our lives waiting to be rediscovered in a rebirth of wonder – waiting to be dumped over our heads like blessing oil, Waiting to be scattered like red glitter on the walls and hallways of dark December.

Christmas [and joy] will be found – In closeted memories, visions, hopes, fears, half-forgotten songs and muddled stories of a child of long ago and in the story of a child named Sam. Christmas [and joy] will be found – Even in bathrooms [and pandemics] – by those who know how to see.<sup>iii</sup>

May we be those who know how to see the golden thread of joy even in the midst of loss.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.insideoutthere.com/this-is-my-story-women-and-homelessness/>

<sup>ii</sup> James M. Wall, “A Soulful Afternoon in the Library,” *Christian Century*, July 10-17, 1991, p. 675.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Fulghum, *Christmas Friarworks* (Morningstar Press, 1981).

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