

Message: “Lord of Joy”

As the announcer would say, “We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming for this important notice.” That’s what today is. Our spiritual journey to the manger isn’t just filled with Sundays of reflection and penitence. We can, and should, lift our eyes from the road every once in a while to enjoy the scenery as it goes by.

Most of you know I lived north of Boston for twelve years before moving to southern California. While living in New England, I discovered I loved riding the train. Whenever I had to travel to New York for business, I’d always take the train. It was easy travel. No matter what work required, I enjoyed seeing parts of the journey I’d normally never encounter. The train was a vehicle for joy in more than one way. Many of our journeys in life are filled with joy. All we have to do is look and see.

So our theme for this Sunday is ... joy. Why? This is the season of joy, so it helps to understand the source of joy.

Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, is the source of joy. Maybe we should give him a new title, “Lord of Joy.” After all, how do you think people feel when he cares for them? Joyful. Some of us struggle to be joyful this time of year. God knows and gives us hope.

Isaiah is a good example. He lived in a time when people felt weak and unsteady. They were in the middle of a war. We live in a time when people feel powerless and unsure. Terrible things were happening in the world in Isaiah’s day. Terrible things are happening in the world. People were in conflict in Isaiah’s time. People are in conflict. There was panic in Isaiah’s community. There’s a lot of grief and panic today.

God gave Isaiah a message to share with the people of his day and with us today. That message: “[*Have*] *courage! Take heart! GOD is here, right here, on the way to put things right and redress all wrongs. God’s on the way! God will save you!*” (Isaiah 35:4). We can trust God. Have faith.

We know when God comes into someone’s life. The signs are obvious. Isaiah shares some of them, “... *the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be cleared. ... the lame will leap*

like the deer, and the tongue of the speechless will sing” (vv5-6). Isaiah is giving us insight to the nature of joy.

Joy is found when we are together with others. Joy is meant to be shared. The joy of a new song is felt when another hears it. The beauty of dance is seen through others’ eyes. Others are invited to share joy. We strengthen each other when we learn how to share our joy. We build each other up when we reach out and gather those who aren’t experiencing joy and help them to find the source of our common joy.

That’s the way, the holy way to follow God. It’s like a road or a golden thread weaving through our lives. When we follow our spiritual guide through the twists and turns of life, we’re staying close to God. That’s important. Wherever God is present, that place is made holy. When we hold onto God in our heart and mind, God is present. A holy space is made within us. That’s where the Holy Spirit lives.

That means the source of joy is inside us when we embrace God. Best of all, that kind of joy goes deep. Joy can’t be taken away from us. Yes, we can lose sight of joy when we’re distracted by the worries and “what ifs” of the world. Yes, we can grow so tired in body, mind and soul we find it hard to imagine joy. But joy never leaves. It remains, waiting to be revealed when we need it most.

Joy is like a woman giving birth. There’s no choice when it comes to the pain and suffering of the moment, but it’s worth it when the child arrives. That moment is sacred. God is present. There’s joy in the middle of the pain, blood and uncertainty of the moment.

We’re in labor, waiting for Jesus to be revealed. We’re groaning with the pain and suffering of our life in uncertain times. All of creation joins us seeking pardon and healing, waiting for what is to come. Joy tells us healing will come.

The wildflowers blooming in the desert each spring are an example. The desert climate is harsh. There’s little water for most of the year and high temperatures burn delicate flowers. Yet, for a few, short weeks each year, flowers bloom. It’s a sign of the promise and beauty of creation. That gives joy.

Healing comes from the sharing our joy. Wholeness comes when we invite and connect with others. Isaiah doesn't say, "Go and heal." He says, "go and build up, and then healing will happen." Together, we'll all become pilgrims on the way. And no one, not even us, can lose our way when we travel together in joy.

Joy may be present, but sometimes our situation masks it.

I've spoken about a friend of mine, Richard and his wife Susie, before. I met Richard – he preferred to be called Hodge, about six weeks after being appointed to my first church. Hodge is a big guy. He shaves parts of his head. He has some serious tattoos. And, by that, I mean the kind you get in prison.

Hodge came up to me after church one Sunday and asked if he could meet with me. I said "yes" and asked him what he wanted to talk about. Hodge said, "I just got out of prison three weeks ago. I need to find out how to tell my grandson he won't see his father again. He's going to prison for life."

The first thing that went through my mind was "what do I say?"

Eric didn't have an answer that day. God did. I prayed about it. I did some research. What I learned is that children often take the blame when a parent is separated, particularly when it happens involuntarily. Hodge, Susie and I got together. We prayed. They shared a bit of their family story. I shared what the experts advised.

Together, we began to pour our time and energy into that young man. There was sadness and sorrow but, over time, he adjusted. He eventually visited his Dad in prison. He spent time with grandma and grandpa – Susie and Hodge. We saw him on special occasions. His life wasn't filled with sadness. He knew joy. He found a life of faith.

I get a similar impression when I read Matthew's scripture about John the Baptist. The text isn't dripping with joy. Matthew isn't pulling any punches as he describes John's current status. John was in prison and was starting to doubt. A year or two earlier, John recognized Jesus as the one he'd been talking about, the one God revealed. John even said, "you should baptize me!" Jesus told him to calm down and do his thing. John was sure then. Now he's wondering. Prison does that to a

person. It squeezes out the joy, hope and certainty. There are a lot of ways we can be imprisoned.

John had taken a risk and spoke out against the behavior of people in power. Now he was suffering for it. John was a political prisoner. He'd been in prison for more than a year. So he sent followers who were still with him to Jesus with a question. Some argue he was doing it for his followers; maybe so. Maybe he needed reassurance himself.

“Was I right that day at the river?” Was that one really the hope of which I spoke? Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John knew he couldn't wait. He didn't have time. Most likely, his days were numbered.

Matthew doesn't tell us whether the disciples of John went back with the news or not. We assume they did. And we hope they brought joy in the stories they shared, the lives they saw changed, and in Jesus' words, *“Go and tell John what you hear and see.”* Watch the reign of God breaking out here and there. Listen for the sound of laughter and hope, sung by the voiceless, danced by the broken. Can you hear it? Can you see it?

Can you be the one who brings this message to people today? The reign of God is breaking out – here and there. Looking for joy doesn't mean ignoring all that's wrong in the world. But it does mean paying attention to what's right, what is of God. What signs do you see? God is alive and at work in the world, in our community, our congregation, small groups and our families. Jesus makes our lives better when we are together. Tell other people what you hear and see.

Let's embrace joy in the presence of the Lord.

Let us pray ...

Isaiah 35:1-10 (CEB)

The desert and the dry land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus.

They will burst into bloom,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

They will receive the glory of Lebanon,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.

They will see the LORD's glory,
the splendor of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,
and support the unsteady knees.

Say to those who are panicking:

“Be strong! Don't fear!
Here's your God,
coming with vengeance;
with divine retribution
God will come to save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf will be cleared.

Then the lame will leap like the deer,
and the tongue of the speechless will sing.

Waters will spring up in the desert,
and streams in the wilderness.

The burning sand will become a pool,
and the thirsty ground, fountains of water.

The jackals' habitat, a pasture;
grass will become reeds and rushes.

A highway will be there.

It will be called The Holy Way.

The unclean won't travel on it,
but it will be for those walking on that way.

Even fools won't get lost on it;
no lion will be there,
and no predator will go up on it.

None of these will be there;
only the redeemed will walk on it.

The LORD's ransomed ones will return and enter Zion with singing,
with everlasting joy upon their heads.

Happiness and joy will overwhelm them;
grief and groaning will flee away.

Matthew 11:2-11 (CEB)

Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

Jesus responded, “Go, report to John what you hear and see. Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. Happy are those who don’t stumble and fall because of me.”

When John’s disciples had gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John: “What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. He is the one of whom it is written: ‘*Look, I’m sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.*’

I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”