

Message: Welcome with Joy¹

How are you today, really?

I’m not asking the coffee hour question. You know, it’s when you ask “How are you?”, expecting to hear “I’m fine, thanks.” Saying anything else is unexpected and risky. You see, if you say “I’m having a crummy day,” that leaves us with a dilemma ...

... do we ask what the problem is or not? When you engage it means you’re agreeing to spend time listening to the other person’s problems, concerns and anxieties. And, since all of us are co-dependent to some degree, our own fears and anxieties are often triggered. We compare ourselves and often make judgments. That’s the risk that comes with real life and authentic, meaningful relationships.

Relationships come with baggage. If you have family visiting for Christmas (or if you are the family members visiting), you know what I mean. Most of us aren’t like the Griswolds, but spending time with people – even our loved ones, means we go past superficial things we say. [Two points for those who get the movie reference.] We’re exposed to the deeper things in life. Some of us are filled with light and life, while others of us are filled with darkness and death. It can be rough. We may feel like we’re disconnected.

It may or may not help, but what we’re experiencing is the same thing people have experienced for millennia. It’s the human condition. No matter who we are, we can’t overcome the world on our own. We can try, but we’ll fail.

So what can we do, where do we turn?

Let me suggest one place: the manger and Jesus’ birth.

Like life, Advent is a journey begins with a rough start.

This year, our journey toward the manger started with the people of Isaiah’s time feeling lost and disconnected from God. As we listened to the dire words from the prophet three weeks ago, we were reminded of

¹ Material drawn from GBOD Advent series, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/third-sunday-of-advent-2017-year-b>

our own sinfulness and our desperate need to realign ourselves with the One who not only created us, but who alone is able to save us.

Two weeks ago, we heard the assurances of Asaph, the psalmist.

In spite of our wrongs, the LORD looks at us with favor and forgives us for what we do – and don’t do. That led us to talk about what home means for each of us. We realized home is the place where we meet.

Home is where we meet our God. Home is where we meet and welcome one another. Home is where we meet to hear peace spoken and where we know that salvation is near. Home is the place where unfailing love and faithfulness align, and where being right with God and peace come together. That kind of home is a place where hope comes from.

The earliest writing in the New Testament is from the Apostle Paul.

He wrote to a community in Thessalonica who were struggling with death, loss and conflict. Here are his words,

“Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Don’t suppress the Spirit. Don’t brush off Spirit-inspired messages, but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-22).

What is the subject of Paul’s first letter to the earliest Christian community? Joy. Specifically, joy when the days are difficult and the nights are impossible. That’s a good lesson for us.

More than 1,000 years earlier, King David wrote these lyrics,

“Sing praises to the LORD, O you ... faithful ones, and give thanks to [God’s] holy name. For God’s anger is but for a moment; God’s favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:4-5). Our tears, fears and anxieties are real. No matter how often you pray, they won’t just go away. But they will come to an end, to resolution, when we turn to Christ. Hope, love and joy come like the morning and the rising of the sun.

That’s why we find true joy when we look into the manger.

God doesn’t come with armies, police or force to intervene in the problems we have in life. God comes as an infant, weak and vulnerable, filled with love and the power to change the world. God entered the

world to show us that, when we’re at our weakest, Jesus is there. And, in that weakness, we can have absolute trust in Jesus’ love.

That’s what faith is, simple and pure.

It’s why we’re gathered here today, to embrace and celebrate God’s love. So let’s prepare ourselves – body, mind and spirit, to welcome Jesus without reservation. Trust God and be free from whatever limits and binds you, filling you with doubt, fear and darkness. Embrace the light of God’s love and find peace in your spirit.

My friends, nobody said the journey of life was going to be easy. Maybe it’s best that Advent always starts off with a hard dose of reality.

Let’s not drown out the Spirit! As we enter the homestretch of the season and begin final preparations, we may feel the desire to say “bah, humbug!” We may have had enough of lights, songs, shopping and forced cheerfulness. Certainly we will hear “bah, humbug” from some those who are gathering in our homes or streaming into our lives. Not all of them are coming with good intentions.

Let’s be filled with grace. We need to acknowledge that, for many of us, welcoming guests or going home will never resemble in any way the pictures of perfect family bliss that we see in the constant holiday barrage of Photoshopped advertisements, television specials, and Christmas movies.

We can enter into this time with rejoicing, prayer, and gratitude, as this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. For no matter how hard the journey may be some days, we know that joy is our true home.

Hear Paul’s final words to the Thessalonians. These aren’t just a nice closing remark, but a blessing for each one of us:

“May the God of peace sanctify us entirely. May our spirits and our souls and our bodies be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

This week is about rejoicing together and going out with joy.

Joy is not happiness. Happiness is fleeting. Joy remains.

Joy isn't in any way a denial of reality, grief, or pain. Joy is the “blessed assurance” that enables us to face and endure every form of evil, injustice, and oppression we may encounter in this age as we anticipate and live from the age to come where Christ makes all things new.

So today we rejoice continually. We can have joy regardless of our circumstances. We pray fervently. We give thanks. And we do so recognizing, with gratitude, that in Christ, God makes it possible for joy to be our true home.

Welcome home! Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Let us pray...

Gracious God, we come to you as your children, made in your image. Hear us today, for we are crying out in need. We need your grace and mercy, yet we struggle with overwhelming fear, anxiety and selfishness. Lead us to the manger and fill us with a spirit of love, peace and joy. Free us from those things that bind us, whispering false messages into our ears. Give us the courage to embrace the new way of life you freely and willingly give. Show us how to truly follow you, no matter what, so that we may live and care for others in Jesus' name. Amen.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (CEB)

The LORD God’s spirit is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me.

He has sent me

to bring good news to the poor,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release for captives,
and liberation for prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor
and a day of vindication for our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
to provide for Zion’s mourners,
to give them a crown in place of ashes,
oil of joy in place of mourning,
a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.

They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, planted by the LORD to glorify himself. They will rebuild the ancient ruins;

they will restore formerly deserted places;
they will renew ruined cities,
places deserted in generations past.

I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and dishonesty.

I will faithfully give them their wage,
and make with them an enduring covenant.

Their offspring will be known among the nations,
and their descendants among the peoples.

All who see them will recognize
that they are a people blessed by the LORD.

I surely rejoice in the LORD;
my heart is joyful because of my God,
because he has clothed me with clothes of victory,
wrapped me in a robe of righteousness
like a bridegroom in a priestly crown,
and like a bride adorned in jewelry.

As the earth puts out its growth, and as a garden grows its seeds, so
the LORD God will grow righteousness and praise before all the nations.

Luke 1:46-56 (CEB)

A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?"

John confessed (he didn't deny but confessed), "I'm not the Christ."

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

John said, "I'm not."

"Are you the prophet?"

John answered, "No."

They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied,

"I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,
Make the Lord's path straight, just as the prophet Isaiah said."

Those sent by the Pharisees asked, "Why do you baptize if you aren't the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

John answered, "I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don't recognize. He comes after me, but I'm not worthy to untie his sandal straps." This encounter took place across the Jordan in Bethany where John was baptizing.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (CEB)

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Don’t suppress the Spirit. Don’t brush off Spirit-inspired messages, but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil.

Now, may the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ’s coming. The one who is calling you is faithful and will do this.