

I've Got the Joy!
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Immanuel Lutheran Church
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Isaiah 2: 1-5 and Romans 13:11-14

Today, this congregation experiences the wide range of emotions as we enter this Christmas season. We began by singing Christmas carols and lighting the advent wreath, as we kick off our "Joy to the World" theme for Advent. This afternoon we will lay Scott Pearson's ashes to rest.

It is an all too real example of something I shared with the kids in the children's sermon, that sad things happen at all times of the year, even at Christmas time. But because of our faith in Jesus, we can still find joy. Happiness depends on our circumstances, so happiness can be fleeting. But joy is so much a part of us that we can find hope and delight and genuine joy even in the midst of suffering and grief.

You may have seen Christmas cards and other greeting cards painted by a handicapped artist named Joni. She actually holds the paint brush in her mouth and makes beautiful paintings that appear on the front of greeting cards. The year Joni Eareckson Tada graduated from high school she was named the "Most Athletic Girl" in her school. That summer she broke her neck in a diving accident and was paralyzed from the neck down. All her hopes and plans for her life were dashed. For a time, she fell into deep depression. But Joni was a Christian. Her faith helped her through. It wasn't easy. She wrestled with God, trying to understand God's plan for her life, but she trusted that is God was bigger than her doubts and disappointments.

In one of her books, *A Step Further*, she writes: "If God's mind was small enough for me to understand, He wouldn't be God . . . Sometimes I can't stand being in a wheelchair, but there God's grace takes over. Even in my handicap, God has a plan and purpose for my life." She continues, "God began his earthly life in a stinky stable. He got angry. He was lonely. He went without a place to call his own, abandoned by his closet friends. He wept real tears. This is a God I can trust. I know my tears count with him."

Joni takes comfort in knowing that Jesus lived in a human body. Jesus experienced first-hand the full range of human emotions. Jesus can relate to her joys and her sorrows, and carry her through.

Joni now leads an active life. In spite of her handicap, she has become a successful commercial artist and a best-selling author. She even starred in a movie about her life.

Joni is an example of a person who knows deep suffering and great joy. The two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, sometimes the more acquainted we become with suffering the more we can appreciate the joys of life.

As we begin this Advent season, we explore 3 questions:

1. Where do we find our joy?
2. What do we need to do to be open to the true joy that only God can bring?
3. And how can we best prepare our hearts to experience the joy of Christ's coming?

Our scripture from Isaiah paints a picture of a future that people have longed for throughout human history. In the first chapter of Isaiah, this prophet describes the situation in which God's people are living. There is war, rebellion, corruption and sins of every kind. In fact, Isaiah says that God's people have become like those of Sodom and Gomorrah. But he lets them know it doesn't have to be this way. In the days to come:

"God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war." (Isaiah 2:4-5)

What a hope-filled image! No more weapons of war and death. Only tools for sustaining life through planting food to nourish people. Isaiah invited people into this joyful future saying "Come, house of Jacob, let's walk by the Lord's light."

1. Where do we find our joy? We find joy in trusting that God is at work, for our good. We find joy in knowing that despite all the war and suffering in the world, God has plans for a better future for all the earth. We find joy by living as people of the light.

Isaiah's invitation to walk by the Lord's light has such appeal. But this is a dark time of year. In fact, today we have only 9 hours and 2 minutes of daylight, with sun rising at 7:30 am and setting at 4:33 pm. That is nearly 15 hours of darkness! This is a dark time of year – literally and figuratively.

2. What do we need to do to be open to the true joy that only God can bring? We need to have faith that even in the midst of darkness, God brings light. We need to be open to being God's agents of light. When the darkness around us seems too thick to ever part, we need to remember times when God was at work, working in and through people just like us, to make things better, and to bring joy where suffering has had the upper hand.

Just over 150 years ago human slavery was an accepted practice in our land. The battle to rid our country of this exploitation began long before the Civil War. The fight to overturn this injustice was a long and sometimes seemingly hopeless battle.

At one point, an especially dark cloud hung over the entire movement to free the slaves. There seemed to be so many entrenched interests, that the hope of true change seemed impossible. Politicians were fearful of upsetting the status quo. One political party supported slavery; the other didn't have the courage to seek to abolish it, but only to restrict it. The Supreme Court had even given judgment against black men as full human beings.

One day, Frederick Douglas, an eloquent spokesperson for the Abolitionist forces, was addressing a crowded meeting. He graphically described the appalling condition of America's black population. Everything was against his people. As Douglas went on with his despairing words, a great darkness seemed to settle upon the audience. It seemed as if they were doomed to continue this barbaric practice.

Just when the cloud was most heavy over the audience, an old black woman slowly rose in the front row. Her name was "Sojourner Truth." Far and wide she was known as an African prophetess who was not afraid to speak truth to power. Every eye was on her. Frederick Douglas paused in his speech.

Every eye was on this woman as she pointed her long bony finger at him asking "Frederick, is God dead?" People instinctively knew, of course not, God is not dead. God is alive. God is active in our lives. God is at work in the world.

As people were reminded of the living God, it was like a lightning flash in the darkness. The cloud began to break. Faith and hope and patience returned as they remembered the living God.

2. So what do we need to do to be open to the true joy that only God can bring? We need to remember that God is alive. God is at work for good. God is about the business of bringing justice to those who are pushed to the margins. God enlists us to be his agents for bringing his message of love and salvation to the world. God enlists us to be his agents of bringing comfort to the oppressed, and joy to the downtrodden. We need to remember that we are not creatures of darkness but creatures of light. And we can't become complaisant.

The Apostle Paul, builds on this image in our passage from Romans, warning us not to squander the light. He writes:

"We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!" (Romans 13:13-14).

It is easy to get complaisant. It has been 2,000 years since Jesus last walked the earth. We may be lulled into thinking that he won't be returning any time soon and we may forget that we have important work to do before he comes again.

Advent is a time of not only looking back to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem that first Christmas, but also looking forward to his return. Advent is a time that reminds us to prepare our hearts and our lives for Jesus' return.

3. And how can we best prepare our hearts to experience the joy of Christ's coming?

We prepare our own hearts when we live our lives loving God and loving our neighbor. God is depending on us to share the good news of his love and salvation with the world. As Christians, we are the Body of Christ. We are entrusted with the holy work of bringing God's presence to a hurting world. We are to feed the hungry and visit the sick. We are to reach out in love and care to those in need, as if we were caring for Christ himself. As Christians, we are to share God's love and serve with joy!

As we live into our calling and as we engage in serving God's world, a sense of meaning and purpose comes over us. We may get frustrated or discouraged at times, but underlying it all we have a deep and abiding sense of true joy.

So, as we live through this Advent season, as we battle snowstorms, attend funerals, and notice all the dark things about our world, remember that we are called to be creatures of the light. God is at work, bringing light out the darkness. As we join in serving God's people, we are God's agents of love and joy. And that love and joy we share with others is reflected right back to us. Happiness can be fleeting, but true joy is always with us through the love of Christ.

Amen!