



Can There Be Joy

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To let you in on the behind-the-scenes working of churches, there is an age old tension between Preachers and Congregations over what to do with Advent. There are Preachers who desire Advent to be a Season like Lent, a time of waiting focused upon repentance in order to be able to celebrate Christmas. These Preachers only select hymns like "In the Bleak Midwinter" "Still, Still Still" "O Come, O Come Emmanuel", who refuse to sing Christmas carols except on Christmas Eve and the two Sundays following. While there are also parishioners and Radio Stations who long to sing Christmas Carols starting on All Saints Day, who then dismantle their trees the afternoon of Christmas Day.

There has been so much depression, anxiety, animosity and fear. We have heard one story of people being angry and obstinate, after another. There really are only TWO Ways to in which we deal with Anxiety; either we BIND that ANXIETY to someone else making it their problem, not ours. OR, we CHANGE ROUTINE finding a hopeful different way of coping, which resolves the Anxiety by sharing JOY and Endorphins with others. Added to the routine-struggles of Midwinter, this year we have been told not to hold hands, not to sit near one another, not to touch, no singing. Last weekend the County Government announced a mandate that no more than 50 people could gather. But we sought out our officials and explained what we were doing and we were given special permission.

If you have not figured this out yet, I am an Optimist. I always Believe, always Hope, always find JOY. But this year, I have been wracking my mind /searching my faith, for "How do we find JOY in this season?" There always seems to be a different way. HOPE, we can find. LOVE, we can find. There is always possibility for PEACE. I even imagined celebrating PEACE this week, just to give God one more week for us to try to find a little JOY! HOWEVER as your Pastor it troubled me deeply that if I could not lead you to find Joy, what hope is there for us all this Advent?

Doctor Seuss was always a favorite around our home, that is except for "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." Could there be anymore commercial rendition of Christmas? In answer to the Grinch believing everything is about the Tree and Presents and Lights and Ornaments, Roast Beast and Mistletoe, the Grinch's heart grows not by God entering in; not by finding Christ's love and sacrifice, but by Suzie Lou Hoo singing "Lannu Lahu" so the Grinch could be the one to give Whoo-ville all the stuff of Christmas. In recent years the number of renditions of this story have multiplied by at least 4. AND what we cannot do is hold hands and sing together, especially with children! Where is Joy?

While there is One Book of Isaiah, there is a great deal belief there were at least 3 different prophets who all wrote in a similar style, prophesying to the same people of Judah; but 3 because Isaiah's prophecy covers over 90 years from the period of Israel's destruction with Babylonian desecration of Solomon's Temple, then in chapters 40-60 while in captivity as Prisoners of War in Babylon envisioning God's Chosen

as a Suffering Servant; then in 61 to the end: after the people of God returned to the Land of Israel confronted with the remnants of a warzone that had been abandoned for 70 years, much like reporters today visiting Chernobyl or Love Canal.

We have heard these phrases from the New Testament quoted so often by Jesus, we hear poetry that ***“The Messiah will proclaim the Year of the Lord’s Favor, when Prisoners will be set free, bestowing a crown in place of ashes, rebuilding ancient ruins, instead of shame you will receive a double portion and instead of disgrace you will rejoice in your inheritance, because everlasting JOY will be yours.”*** Painfully when the people returned to Jerusalem they labored for decades, and those who saw what had been built as the second Temple wept that it was nothing in comparison. Only when corrupt King Herod manipulated the resources of the Roman Empire was the Second Temple able to be rebuilt with Jewish slave labor, and this only completed in the generation before Jesus’ birth. There was such international oppression and emotional depression under the Roman Empire that when Jesus returned to his home town and Synagogue it is reported that he read this Prophecy from Isaiah 61 proclaiming the coming of God’s Messiah and the Year of the Lord’s Favor, at which the crowds tried to throw Jesus off the cliffs of Nazareth for proposing they believe God would promise them Joy.

Mary’s response in the Annunciation is so beautiful it has been taken out of context as The Magnificat! But Mary’s Advent quality of Joy can only be perceived within the context of the One who would be chosen to be the Mother of God’s Messiah; otherwise she is a only girl, far too young even to be married, giving birth to a child. One of the earliest controversies still fought over today comes from the 3rd Century, over how we accept Mary? As the Messiah is fully Human and fully Divine, is Mary the most ordinary of women in a time and culture where women were denied the rights of the lowest Economic Class of men? In a time, when families arranged the marriage of their daughter by age 15, she is too young and yet biologically found to be with child? Or by being “The Mother of the Son of God,” is Mary herself Divine? The early church struggled with whether our shift is from One God only, to believe in the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost; OR whether Mary was part of that Godhead and we believe in 4 Natures of God? In this passage, only in Luke, Advent’s JOY is personified in recognizing the responsibility given to her by God.

Suddenly Tuesday Pastor Diane took me aside sharing, “If you are still having difficulty finding JOY, I would like to share a couple stories with you.” She described having a family friend back in Minnesota who is in Assisted Care, whom she cares about so much she serves as his Power of Health Care. He had phoned her that morning to inform her that his Nursing Staff had scheduled him for receiving the Vaccine Monday morning! Throughout this year, we have lived in isolation, regularly disinfecting, avoiding family and friends and regular routine or celebrations, out of fear that there was no preventative for this disease. Then we heard rumor and reports that vaccines were possible in England, but authority had not yet been given in the United States. And here someone she knows and bears responsibility for is scheduled to receive this preventative which will change our current context starting tomorrow! The miracle is real!

A member of our church was going up to Tucson for Medical Treatments, only to discover that the procedure had been postponed. One more anxiety, not that the procedure was not needed, not that it would not happen, just that you wasted 2 hours out of your day. Trying to get something done she went to Trader Joes for Groceries. As she waited 6 feet distant from anyone else, wearing her mask, the busy Salesclerk asked “How are you today?” And where normally she would have said one of those 4 letter words :Fine, Okay, Good,” instead she uncharacteristically burst open about her husband having a suspected recurrence of his disease and her medical issues, which now were postponed not because she did not have to have these but some administrative problem related to COVID. Suddenly the Clerk stopped

her and asked her to wait right there as the Clerk left the Check-out area. Our friend said “Great, now I overwhelmed the Check-out Clerk” and the Clerk was gone for several moments. When the Clerk returned she placed a bouquet of flowers on the Counter saying these were already paid for.

But I would affirm a third JOY, my own Joy, that when I was struggling with where and how to find JOY in the midst of this year, this year that has felt God-forsaken and anything but GOOD, FINE or OKAY, A friend and colleague cared, stepped up and offered: here are my stories of Joy you could share. That trust with one another’s story, with sharing in ministering to you, that is my Joy.