

## Teach our hearts to welcome joy

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

3rd Sunday in Advent - December 13, 2020

Texts: Isaiah 61, Psalm 126, John 1:6-8, 19-28

### SCRIPTURE READING from Isaiah 61

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

### RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the earth, we felt like dreamers:  
Our mouths were filled with laughter and shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

**May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.**

The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.  
Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the desert.  
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

**May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.**

### GOSPEL READING John 1:6-8, 19-28

*Last week we met John the Baptist as introduced by Mark: a wild man, calling people to repent and be baptized. John presents him in a slightly different light: we might see him as a trickster figure, dancing away from the barbs of the authorities, and speaking in riddles most of them would never understand, because they were blinded by the assurance of their own importance. In this way, John fulfilled his God-given role of pointing always to the One he called the Light and the Lamb of God.*

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. Heaven and earth will pass away, but the word of our God stands forever. TBTG

Do you ever get tired of being the center of your own universe? Especially as covid and cold weather pull us deeper inside our personal safe spaces, I can find it harder to imagine that there is a whole wide world out there. If I were to draw a map of my private world, my little house would take up 95% in the middle, the neighborhood where we walk the dog a fat margin around it, Rochester a skinny boundary. And the rest of the world would be barely a whisper on the edge. Unless you're actually *going* to work, your world probably looks pretty similar - except with you, of course, in the center. Well, I get tired of this small world that's mostly about me.

And so when I wake at night and sleep doesn't return quickly, I turn on the radio and listen to the international news: Did you know that British companies are frantically scrambling to be ready for Brexit come December 31? Now there's something alien to my personal universe. Or, more sadly, doctors are dying as they battle the virus in Africa. One doctor interviewed spoke of losing four colleagues in a week. One was only 28 - he had worked every day for the last five months. Without any pay. Will they get the vaccine only after the wealthy nations have gobbled up the first offerings?<sup>1</sup> Or I tune into a Zoom conference on gender-based violence (GBV) in Myanmar, Iraq, and South Sudan, where women have no rights whatsoever, young girls are forced into early marriage to old men, or into heavy jobs that cripple their growing bodies for life; where they are sexually harassed by the same men responsible for policing their camps. Yet courageous women band together anyway, peacefully, forcefully, facing down the demons of patriarchy.<sup>2</sup> The news is often surprising, sometimes horrifying, but it does broaden my perspective. It reminds me, "No, Jan, you are not the center of the universe. You are just one miniscule piece of it."

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<sup>1</sup> While I'm certain I remember these stories correctly, I can only cite the BBC broadcast sometime in the middle of some night in the past week.

<sup>2</sup>Nonviolentpeaceforce.org, Nonviolence Cafe #10, December 9, 2020.

And it's a good thing, too. I'm not exactly equipped to be master of any universe, even my own. Neither was John the Baptist. He is so very proud of *not* being the one, *not* being the light, or the Messiah. He is practically gleeful about denying it, teasing the spies of authorities, announcing in riddles the one who is coming after but already among you, incognito -- unseen and unknown but so awe-inspiring that John feels unworthy even to kneel down to him to tie his shoe. This coming one was prepared from the dawn of creation to do exactly what John could not, and you and I cannot: that is, save the world. The one whose influence would grow and swell to reach the ends of the earth, even as John's influence would wane. This one would be, as we've affirmed in our Advent services, "the beginning of a new creation and the pioneer of a new humanity." The prospect of fading before *this* one made John positively joyful. He was completely happy with his role on the edge of history, pointing to the one who would come to fill the center. John was content to be just a voice calling in the wilderness, and then fade away. And yet, outside of the Bible, historical accounts of that time speak more of John than of Jesus. But then, history doesn't always have a clue about what's really happening in the grand scheme of things.

The grand scheme of things, the God's eye view of history, is exactly what we miss when we keep ourselves firmly planted at the center of our own universe, seeing our own joys and woes as larger than everything else, our own work as the most significant, our needs the most pressing in the world. I feel a profound pity for those who are so spiritually impoverished that they need constantly to draw attention to themselves and their own concerns and grievances, and their own importance. It's so wonderfully freeing to find that it isn't true! That, in fact, the salvation of the world doesn't depend on me or you. When I grasp that it's not all about me, I can start focusing on what it *is* about. No, I'm not everything. But I'm not nothing either. And I do have a part to play and so do you. And that part can be played wherever you are, whoever you are.

I think of two people in particular who seem to play their parts exceptionally well. Both of them live quiet lives in small apartments surrounded by others who care for them, and for whom they care; both of them are humble and unassuming, but with wide-awake minds and interests that reach far beyond their modest walls. Both of them live, I know, bathed in an atmosphere of prayer for the world. Neither will likely be mentioned in any history book, and yet they are John the Baptists of today. Their lives, their speech, their bright faces point always beyond themselves to the one who came, who is coming, and who is always already among us, and near to each of us: to Jesus the Christ. One is my mother's sister Joanne; affectionately known in our family as Auntie Jo. She celebrated her 96th birthday in October. We think of her as one who has achieved enlightenment but who graciously remains around to keep pointing us lesser mortals along right paths for Jesus' sake. Every time I speak to her, I feel her quiet joy in living, the deep roots of her love for God, her care for the whole world, her trust in her Savior to make all things right and new. The other person is our own favorite centenarian, Margaret Nelson - someone many of you know better than I. She's the one all of us still in our 60s and 70s want to be like when we grow up. Like Auntie Jo, she combines an avid interest in the world with the joyful serenity of faith

baptized in the fire of the Holy Spirit. They may resort to mechanical devices to help them get about, yet they are, in Isaiah's words, oaks of righteousness; they are the planting of God's own hand, showing forth God's glory. They know that those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.

They and so many others like them have taught me: once the Spirit finds a crack in your personal universe, once the Light begins to enter your cramped and darkened world, it opens a wedge that grows wider and wider with time, and patience, and prayer, and love. And what fills that wedge is joy. Not simply happiness, but joy - deep and abiding, as comforting as a warm embrace, as exhilarating as flying with your own wings over the Grand Canyon. Each day fills you more with love for God and love for the world, in all its thorny perplexity.

I give thanks for John the Baptist, who opened a way in his world to prepare people's hearts for the Messiah to come. And I give thanks for all those who open a way into my little world, who teach my heart to welcome joy. I give thanks for each one of you. I give thanks to God, who was and is to come and is with us in every breath we take. Amen.

### Prayers

God of all that is, all that has been, all that will be - thank you for entering our small worlds and showing us what the world can be, when we open our hearts to you and each other. We thank you for all those whose lives point us to you

We pray for girls and women deprived of basic human rights and preyed upon within their own community; show them the power they can claim and share;

We remember this precious earth you created with so much love; rather than exploiting it for our own selfish desires, may we care for it, and leave it better than we found it; may we "leave no trace" of our being here.

We hold in your Light all whose lives are burdened by illness, especially those suffering the unknowns of covid; we pray not only for the thousands afflicted here, but those around the world, where adequate health care is lacking and health care workers are even more vulnerable. We ask your healing, comforting presence with those dear to our hearts.

Most especially, we thank you for those whose lives have blessed our own, but who have passed through death to new life in you. Comfort all those who mourn with the promise that death is no more than the gate to eternal life.

All this we ask in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven..."