

Third Sunday in Advent,
Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy
December 13, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Lighting the Candle of Joy

Reader 1: When God's people were surrounded by hardship, suffering, and grief, Isaiah proclaimed, "The spirit of the Lord 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. (Isaiah 61:1-3a)

Reader 2: We come today as people who are also surrounded by suffering and grief. And yet, the Spirit hovers among us, tending and anointing, inspiring freedom where there is captivity, declaring blessing in places the world has cursed, and igniting fierce joy where mourning and heartache prevail.

Congregation: We wait as people who experience hardship and pain, yet we are called to witness to the persistent joy that sustains our life as God's people.

Reader 1: We light two blue candles and the pink candle as signs of our shocking hope, just peace, and fierce joy. May our lives shine with the fierce, tenacious joy of the Light who lives in our hearts as we wait and work for the coming of God's kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

*Hymn 147 The First Noel

Prayer

We come, O God, with thanksgiving and praise. Our anticipation grows as we approach the day of Jesus' birth. Open our hearts that we may truly receive the gift of your Son, and know the joy of abundant life with you. Guard us from all sinful intentions and desires, and forgive our transgressions, so that by following Jesus, we may want for nothing but the joy of our salvation. Through Christ, who comes to make all things new. Amen.

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness Isaiah 43:19

God announces:

“See I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up, do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the desert.”

God is sending his Son, a Savior, to make all things and all people new.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel. Your sins are forgiven and be at peace.

First Reading Isaiah 35:1-10

Time With Our Young Disciples

Scripture Reading Luke 1:39-56

The Morning Message

One of the loveliest settings in our community is the Ritter Park Rose Garden. One of the most treasured places in our nation’s Capitol is the White House Rose Garden. A nosegay of roses was the only accessory chosen by a young bride to go with her antique lace wedding gown. “Rose” is the middle name of our winsome little granddaughter. A tribute to her great-grandmother.

Delicate, beautiful, fragrant, pure sweetness and light. The rose.

Rev. Talitha Arnold says in her yard stood a rose bush. It had no business being there, in her opinion. The ground was too hard and was littered with too many rocks. It was impossible to get grass to grow, much less a rose bush. Trash piled up against the fence and people were known to throw bottles of all sorts into the straggly yard. She says the back yard of their Bristol Street house was certainly no rose garden.

The rose bush had been the planting of her friend, Joan, when she and her family had moved out of the local housing project and into the small house with the tiny backyard. Joan and her husband had developed a group ministry in the inner city after they both graduated from seminary and became ordained ministers. They had moved into the projects, lived on a minimal salary, and raised their family in one of the most impoverished cities on the east coast. Because of their work and commitment, their home became a sort of gathering place, where people could come for fellowship and support, much like a church.

Neighbors came at all hours of the day and night. Some were involved in community projects, and the house served as a meeting place. Others came for counsel, and some for food or a place to sleep.

Talitha says the work, the ministry, was hard. Most of the population lived on the edge- on the edge of homelessness, poverty, or the edge of addiction. Racism was particularly challenging. Sometimes the needs were so great and the resources so small. There were times when Joan felt close the edge, too, and despair threatened.

Talitha says she thinks that's why Joan planted the rosebush. It really made no sense in that scrawny backyard. It was a pain to water in the summer and always looked half dead in the winter. But every spring, when it first turned warm, she would go out and dig around it. She would prune, fertilize and work the soil. And every year it gifted her with bright red roses.

Whenever life or work got to be too much, Joan would go out and sit by the rosebush that had no business being there. Maybe she hoped to absorb some of its tenacity, its spunk.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly.”

Isaiah is a long and involved biblical text. Most biblical scholars agree that the 35th chapter of Isaiah is out of place. Like Joan's rosebush, it doesn't belong here. The chapters before and after are harsh and mournful. Death and desolation are everywhere.

Isaiah must tell people that they had been unfaithful to God and that there were consequences to that infidelity. A foreign nation would come to overtake them and they would be destined to live in captivity. There would be exiles and slaves, “gathered like persons in a pit, shut up in prison.”

Not only will the people suffer, so will the land. Once Israel had been the vineyard of the Lord and Judah a pleasant planting. But now, Isaiah says, the hedge is torn down and the vineyard devoured. It is a wasteland overgrown with briars and thorns. Like exiled people marching to captivity, “the earth will stagger like a drunkard, it will fall and not rise again.” Isaiah 24:20

That's the climate of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, what is known as “First Isaiah. Everywhere except chapter 35. Here we find joy, strength, courage, streams running and fountains springing up in the desert. The contrast is so stark, it startles us. It makes about as much sense as planting a lone rosebush on Bristol Street.

And this turn-around is all God's doing. Scripture doesn't say the people have changed or repented or reconciled with their neighbor, near or far.

But, from Isaiah comes a new word and a new vision of the land that comes back to life. God will strengthen hands made weak and knees made feeble. That is especially good news for all of

us struggling with joint and bone disease. The blind will see and the deaf will hear. Glory to God! Nothing in the text prepares us for this change. It just happens. Joy bursts forth like the crocus blooming in the desert. God's joy can't be stopped. It's a gift.

Today is Gaudete Sunday, or the Sunday of Joy. The third Sunday of Advent we pause to recognize the joy of the season. Years ago, the practice of observing the season of Advent was much like Lent. It was to be set apart for prayer and self-examination. Parties, weddings, and other celebrations were not to be held during this time in order for the faithful to focus more seriously on scripture and prayer and setting one's spiritual life in order.

We aren't that strict about things any more, but sometimes, in our very busy lives, Advent or ordinary time, we can misplace our joy.

Don't delay joy. That's not an original thought. I heard it on Law and Order.

But it fits. I was raised in a family that valued delayed gratification. Nothing wrong with that...unless we just quit dreaming or hoping or acting with any degree of spontaneity because fulfilling those requests are always post-poned.

When Talitha was still living at home, a neighbor came to their door one day and handed her mother a bouquet of flowers. "These are for you," said their neighbor. His wife thought she might like them."

Talitha's mother was too flustered to invite him in, but she was clearly moved by the gesture. She doesn't remember any special reason for the flowers other than it was the summer when her brother endured a lengthy hospitalization, and her other brother was getting ready to start college. She knew her mother was under a lot of pressure, feeling a lot of anxiety, as she worried about how her family would function on her meager salary.

There was no reason for the flowers but, it was the first and only time the neighbor had called on them and the only time Talitha saw anyone give her mother flowers. It was a moving experience, as she remembers the tears glistening in her mother's eyes as she thanked the neighbor.

Her mother found a vase that she filled with water and added the pretty blooms. She placed them carefully on the coffee table where they stayed for as long time. They brought her joy. For no obvious reason..

Has joy surprised you lately? Ever? Last week was a tough one for me, but, my best cheerleader was beside me, reminding me that I was not alone, and yes, he would pick up Chinese donuts. Our puppy, who is typically too independent to snuggle with us, parked her toasty little self on our bed and fell asleep against my leg. I counted it all as joy.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad.
The desert shall rejoice and blossom,
Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing...
They shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

May it be so for all of us.

*Hymn 105 People, Look East, verses 1-3

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns
Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn Christmas Doxology (insert)

*Prayer of Dedication

Lord God, as Mary presented herself as the means through which your Son would come to earth, we present ourselves, our intentions, and our treasure, that you may use us to bring the joy of your realm ever closer to the world you created and love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

*Hymn 105 People, Look East, verses 4 and 5

*Blessing

Go now, for you are chosen and sent in the Spirit.

Pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances.

Keep what is good, avoid every kind of evil.

To all in need bear witness that the time is come when the Sovereign Lord will save his people.

And may God who gives peace make you holy in every way.

May Christ Jesus clothe you with salvation.

And may the Holy Spirit speak through you with the good news of life everlasting. Amen.

*Postlude