

The First Reading is from Isaiah 12:2-6

- ² Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and
my might; he has become my salvation.
- ³ With joy you will draw water from
the wells of salvation.
- ⁴ And you will say in that day:
Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.
- ⁵ Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done
gloriously; let this be known in all the
earth.
- ⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal
Zion, for great in your midst is the
Holy One of Israel.

The Second Reading is from Habakkuk 3:17-19

- ¹⁷ Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold,
and there is no herd in the stalls,
- ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
- ¹⁹ GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.

The Third Reading is from John 16:16-24

¹⁶ "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." ¹⁷ Then some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying to us, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" ¹⁸ They said, "What does he mean by this 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about."

¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'?" ²⁰ Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.

²¹ When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because *her hour has come*. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. ²² So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice,

and ***no one will take your joy from you.*** ²³ On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. ***Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.***

The Message is entitled *Joy Mends*

With my eyes wide open and my senses on high alert, the spiritual energy and excitement of the gathered masses was palpable. On the auditorium stage at Indiana University, I was one of many communion servers who had the privilege of witnessing thousands of young people waiting to receive the bread of life and cup of salvation. As Isaiah Jones, our worship leader, began to sing, “Fill my cup, let it overflow,” joy literally exploded from somewhere deep within me and overwhelmed me as tears of joy welled up and spilled over. Joy, a deep-felt joy, I didn’t want it to end.

A mist was gently rising off the lake as the dawn chased away the darkness. I sat quietly, bundled in my jacket and gloves, listening to the dawn come alive, as birds rustled in their nests and their songs faintly began to flavor the morning. The marble like surface of the bluish green water reflected the symphony of shoreline trees. A gentle breeze released an occasional amber leaf that floated to the dance floor of the lake’s surface. I was sitting in silence, in awe of the wonder of the morning, with all its sights and sounds, when joy overwhelmed me. The words of Isaiah immediately came to mind, “I have created you... I have called you by name, you are mine... because you are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you.” In the midst of such simple beauty, joy welled up within me as I reflected on God’s deep love for me and all of creation. Joy, deep-felt joy overwhelmed me and I didn’t want the experience to end.

Experiences of deep joy flood my thoughts this morning: memories of Christmases past, as I remember with joy the gathering of family and friends around tables of grace; memories of Christmas caroling, as I remember with joy the three year-old merrily singing in his Costco cart this past Friday. What about Christmases past or present cause you to draw water from the well of joy?

Can you recall a time when joy welled up within you and overwhelmed you? Can you recall an experience of joy that you didn’t want to end?

The disciples were experiencing first-hand the power of God at work in and through Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry. I imagine everyday was a surprise for the disciples as they wondered if Jesus would heal or feed, forgive or rebuke. I am certain the disciples had experiences of joy in the midst of Jesus’ ministry that they didn’t want to end. As a matter of fact, being in Jesus entourage and following his daily steps was probably the world’s best joy ride! Witnessing healings, miraculous feedings, resurrections, transfigurations and more. Who would have wanted it to end?

Yet, an ending is what we read about in the Gospel of John this morning, even as we prepare, this third Sunday in Advent, for Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. In our text today, the disciples are perplexed with Jesus’ words.

Jesus words come to us as part of his farewell address to the disciples. Jesus has gathered his disciples on the night of his arrest. He has washed their feet. He has told them that they would be best known by their love for one another. I imagine with wine glass in hand, Jesus talks of himself as the vine and the disciples as branches. Jesus also warns the disciples not to worry about those who will hate them on account of him. Jesus tells of the coming of the Advocate,

the Spirit of truth, who will guide them in the future. And then Jesus cryptically says, “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.”

Jesus stirred up a hornet’s nest of questions according to Peterson’s translation! I can only imagine the conversational bubbles, like those above cartoon characters, popping up over the heads of the disciples. Jesus knew the disciples were dying to ask him exactly what his cryptic message meant and so he spared them the agony and said, “Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy!”

If the disciples were already perplexed, now they were thoroughly confused. I hear them saying to each other what does Jesus mean that we will have pain? There’s no pain in hanging out with Jesus witnessing the miraculous. Life is pretty good! So, what does Jesus mean that we will weep and mourn? Is our joy ride with Jesus ending? Is Jesus going somewhere? The disciples expect joy, miraculous joy, and unending joy! Not weeping and mourning, pain and suffering!

As I place myself in this text, my mind’s eye imagines Jesus commanding the disciples’ attention as he attempts to draw them to a deeper truth than their questions. Jesus says to them, “Your pain will be turned into joy and it will be a joy that cannot be taken away. It will be joy that completes you.”

I imagine the disciples wondering to themselves yet again, “What pain? And what joy is not fleeting?” You see, even at this stage in Christ’s unfolding drama, the disciples are blind to the reality that is only hours away. They are savoring the joy ride of being with Jesus. They have no clue of the pain, the fear, the suffering that will overtake them in a matter of hours.

Yet, Jesus doesn’t want to leave the disciples unprepared for what is about to happen. Jesus wants to them to know that they will soon experience a joy that can never be taken away. This joy is not dependent on circumstances, its deeper and richer than any human joy they have ever experienced.

The prophet Habakkuk knew the possibility of such joy and in remembering this, I added this reading this morning. Listen to God’s word from this prophet as translated by Eugene Peterson:

Though the cherry trees don’t blossom
and the strawberries don’t ripen,
Though the apples are worm-eaten
and the wheat fields stunted,
Though the sheep pens are sheep less
and the cattle barns empty,
I’m singing joyful praise to GOD.
I’m turning cartwheels of joy to my Savior God.
Counting on GOD’s Rule to prevail,
I take heart and gain strength.
I run like a deer.
I feel like I’m on top of the mountain!

What I find refreshing about Habakkuk as one of the Minor Prophets is that he speaks our word to God. He totally gets that life doesn’t make sense at times. He gets the bewilderment and pain we experience remembering such tragedies as the anniversary of Sandy Hook this past Friday. He gets our need cry out to God and say, “What’s up, are you asleep at the wheel God?” Habakkuk gives us voice with a prophet’s no-nonsense bluntness. Yet, even after letting God have a piece

of his mind he ends with the words we just heard. There is this joy, this deep joy that cannot be quenched or snuffed out by the reality of our own circumstances or the oft retched condition of the world around us.

Isaiah reminds us of this truth as well saying, "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; the Lord has become my salvation."

It is not our circumstances that causes this deep joy; it comes from knowing and trusting that the God of all of creation is for us, that God's immeasurable love is always ready and willing to enfold us, that our circumstances are not the final word in our stories.

This God-breathed joy is the joy capable of mending the world. This joy, Jesus says to his disciples, will come in a little while. This joy - that cannot be taken away - is the by-product of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection.

Yet, you and I are in the season when we await the birth of Christ, not his death and resurrection! Yet, this mystery of Advent is part of the mystery of Holy Week. Jesus' beginning and ending held together remind us that life, not death, triumphs.

When a woman is experiencing labor pains, the pain is overwhelming said Jesus. In the midst of her travail she focuses on the pain and the struggle. But, once the child is born, her focus changes. The new life overwhelms the memory of pain and joy bursts forth. I can attest to this truth. This is the joy Jesus says his disciples will experience in a little while. This is the joy that you and I have access to today as post resurrection people.

Jesus said to his disciples, "Your joy will be a river overflowing its banks!" Friends, this overflowing joy can mend the world, in us and through us, for overflowing joy draws others the true source of all joy. Overflowing joy in us is to be our witness, as we seek Christ at the manger this Advent. Emmanuel, God is with us! This is the source of our overflowing joy, for as Abbott Marmion says, "Joy is the echo of God's life in us."

Joy, like hope and peace, though is a choice; for the babe born in Bethlehem will not coerce us. Gabriel came to Mary, but Mary consented saying, "Let it be with me." Joseph was ready to dismiss Mary, but he chose to receive the divine messenger's counsel. The angels proclaimed the good news of great joy to shepherds, but they decided to act on the news and go to Bethlehem. This babe we await in Bethlehem will not coerce us.

Habakkuk knew this and in spite of all that was wrong for him and the people of God, he chose joy: "I'm singing joyful praise to GOD. I'm counting on GOD's Rule to prevail. Therefore, I feel like I'm on top of the mountain!"

On this Third Sunday of Advent... will you choose joy? Will we choose joy as a church? Will we overflow with joy bearing witness to Emmanuel?

Listen to Joy Carol whose life has been turned upside by a neurological disease. She blogs, "There have been moments during these last almost five months when the loss and grief I have felt related to my ongoing illness have been overwhelming - when I have felt that my life was crumbling from under me. I confess there were times when I sobbed and screamed at God to tell me what I was going to do with such a diminished life." Yet, in the midst of her illness she published a new book entitled, "Seasons of Joy!" She chooses joy because God, the Beloved Giver of miracles and of life, welcomes her broken heart and diminished spirit. She is grateful for God's endless encouragement and belief in her as a precious child.

Pastor Thomas Douglas writes that small churches are great churches when they display joy! Douglas cautions small churches (actually, all churches) to remember that rejoicing is not confined to a sanctuary during worship service times, but rather as a way of life in response to the love of God. Douglas shared about another pastor who experienced the truth of this in the strangest of places – on a train bound for Munich during Oktoberfest. Traveling glitches caused the pastor’s mood to sour, but the anticipative joy of the crowd on this train (free from alcohol) was intriguing. The pastor couldn’t understand a word that was being said, but he experienced it as joy! And so, the pastor made these observations about the church, “What if church services would feel something like this train ride?

- Old friends chatting amiably
- Strangers greeting each other with sincere joy
- A giddy expectation of a great experience to come
- Embracing old traditions while celebrating new ones.

Can you imagine how people would be drawn to the gospel of Jesus, if every church felt like the train ride Douglas’ pastor friend experienced?

What Douglas’ pastor friend realized that day was that people don’t need to understand the language to appreciate the joy. They don’t need to have the same anticipation of the experience as we do. They don’t even need to know each other. They just need to be among those who know and live this kind of joy. They need to hear that they’re welcome to join in when they’re ready. Joy may be contagious. But, joy, the deep joy offered by the babe in Bethlehem, isn’t automatic.

And so, I ask again, will you choose joy? Will we choose joy as a church? Will we cultivate, anticipate and celebrate this joy freely offered from the wells of our salvation? Will this deep joy spill forth from our lives, so that others will be drawn to the wells of salvation? Jesus said to his disciples, “Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete... for no one will take your joy from you.” Will we choose joy? I pray so, for this is the joy within us that can help us participate in mending the world! Amen.