

**The First Presbyterian Church of Redlands**  
**Rev. Cheryl Raine**  
**December 15, 2019 – The Third Sunday of Advent**

**The First Reading is 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22**

“<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not despise the words of prophets, <sup>21</sup> but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup> abstain from every form of evil.”

**The Second Reading is Luke 1:46-53**

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,  
“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

**The Message is entitled, *Joyous Expectation***

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” sang Mary. Mary, who was expecting, made her way to her relative in the hill country who was also expecting. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child being knit together in her womb leapt with joy. Imagine the scene, two expectant moms, one older and one younger. Two expectant moms holding within them the dreams of a child to be born through their miracle pregnancies.

As I imagine these two women and Mary’s song, memories flood of my own joy at the expectant joy of our twin sons. My words weren’t exactly like Mary’s, but my soul magnified God. And this day, I hold the dreams as an expectant grandmother, with Kayla now just a month away from her due date and my son, Aaron, being that much closer to being a father. It is hard to contain my joy, as I imagine holding this precious new baby girl and imagining these two are new parents. All the firsts that will unfold as they welcome this precious new life.

Yet, even as we imagine these precious new lives – of Mary and Elizabeth’s, and of Kayla and Aaron’s, the world around us screams but all is not right: the dear children and teachers killed 7 years ago yesterday at Sandy Hook Elementary School and 3 years ago at the San Bernardino Christmas Party and the ten people recently killed in just four days in Sagus, San Diego and Fresno; the tragic eruption of a New Zealand volcanic island populated by tourists on vacation; the spewing of hate and rage through social media channels; the exploitation of young girls and boys for the carnal pleasure of adults; politically abusive power causing citizens

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to flee for their lives, rising sea levels and melting permafrost and glaciers, and divisions that tear families and nations apart.

A persistent nagging question floating around the world right now is this: “How can we be joyful in a moment of history like this?” How can we be joyful in the midst of such pain, suffering, sorrow and chaos in our world?

Ross Gay, a writer and a professor of English at Indiana University Bloomington, responds to this question saying: “How can we *not* be joyful, *especially* in a moment like this?” He reminds us that joy has nothing to do with ease. Instead, he says, “It has everything to do with the fact that we’re all going to die.” Life is tragic, but also beautiful; filled with sorrow as well as joy. And joy doesn’t discount the reality of the way things are, but joy doesn’t let darkness overcome it. Life is to be lived says Ross Gay in the present moment and that is exactly where joy resides.

When Ross Gay keeps in mind the finitude of life he is able to find delight in all sorts of places as he appreciates the gift of now. He even wrote a book entitled, *The Book of Delights*, which contains almost a year’s worth of essayettes on delight. Listen to part of his introduction, “It didn’t take me long to learn that the discipline or practice of writing these essayettes [on delight] occasioned a kind of delight radar... a month or two into this project delights were calling to me: *Write about me! Write about me!* Because it is rude not to acknowledge your delights. [He also learned] that his delight grows – much like love and joy – when it is shared.” This book trains one’s gaze to see delight, to experience wonder and joy even amidst the terrible.

Yet, what is delight and joy? It’s plastered on social media, for “The Instagram generation is with us, and there’s a lot of display of joy. Or there’s a lot of quick pleasure, a rush of excitement,” says Imani Perry, an American interdisciplinary scholar of race, law, literature, and African-American culture at Princeton University. “[Yet,] joy is [actually] something much deeper than that. It’s not [quick pleasure] or surface [emotions]. It’s something that reaches deep inside that, at the most beautiful moments, is a moment of connection with, if not another person, with the Earth. Ross Gay agrees saying, “Joy is the moments when my alienation from people — but not just people, from the whole of everything — goes away.” Through joy we become part of a greater whole. Through joy we are connected to each other, to creation and to the mystery we call God.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... God’s mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” Certainly, Mary sings about herself, but her song of joy connects her to others, especially to those who struggle – the lowly, the hungry, the poor. She sees God at work upending the status quo by leveling the playing field so that everyone has a seat at the table. Joy connects us to something more.

Take a moment to bring to mind your most recent experience of joy. It might have been witnessing a magnificent sunset or a snow laden landscape. It might have been the wonder of music or a photographic image. It might have been belly laughter or the embrace of a loved one. It might have been beholding a newborn or witnessing a seasoned couple walk hand in hand. In your mind’s eye, bring to mind a moment of joy. Then pay attention to the connections. Pay attention to who is brought into view. Pay attention to the something more.

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How did this particular joy connect you more deeply to others as well as to the world around you?

If you were to embark on writing about your daily experiences of delight and joy, what shape would your essayettes take? I know mine would often be related to the natural world as well as to young children. Just ask Judy, as when I show up after being with first graders most Wednesday mornings, I arrive with a light spirit and a wide smile simply because of the delight that I just experienced. This past Wednesday the golden leaves of the yellow poplars poised against the blue skies were also a source of joy as I walked in and out of Kingsbury. Haven't the December colors around town just been gorgeous and the first views of the November snow. Is your internal radar calibrated to perceive delight and joy?

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." So how can we help each other hone our internal radars to experience delight and joy day in and day out? It's like anything else in life it takes practice. What if we helped each other by simply asking each other. Do you remember the joy I asked you to bring mind? Would you take a moment to share it with your pew neighbor who may be sitting in front of you or behind you or a row or two away? Let's take a moment to share with each other our moments of connection, our moments of joy...

Did you notice the change in energy in this room? Joy is contagious. Delight spreads. And sharing these with each other hones our internal joy detectors or as Ross Gay shared, after a month or two of writing about delights each day, "They were calling to me: *Write about me! Write about me!*"

Imagine an hour, a day, a week, when delights just called out to you! A beautiful bird song, a dear friend, a deep silence, a radiant tree, a loving embrace, a sweet ripe red raspberry, a belly laugh, a beautiful blossom.

"Rejoice always." I want to share with you an image that helps me to remember this call. It's an image that calibrates my joy radar, which resists being overcome by the darkness of our personal circumstances as well as the circumstances of our world. The image is the tenacity of flora sprouts that arise from cracks in sidewalks or pavement. In my mind's eye, I always see the palm tree that inhabited a crack in the center median of the five freeway back in my commuting days. Every time I drove by that palm, I couldn't help but marvel at its fierce determination towards hope and life even in the midst of a diet of incessant fumes and traffic noise. Its tenacious presence reminded me that joy is always present, for from the thinnest slivers of earth life emerges and blossoms.

This is the spirituality of our joy as people of faith. It's not our circumstances that determine our joy, for in light of divine sovereignty they are never ultimate. Our circumstances do not have the last word. Joy is sourced by God, for God loves us and claims us. Even though the world around us is humming with anxiety and filled with horrendous tragedies, the Source of our joy is steadfast and ever faithful. So, Paul Rudnick writes, "There is only one real blasphemy [for us as people of faith]: the refusal of joy." And this is because "Joy is the echo of God's life in us," according to Columba of Iona. Joy is in us waiting to be shared. Delight is all around us as attested by Ross Gar. The only question is whether or not we will bear witness to the joy among us. And I dare to say, that whether or not joy is shared in the midst of our lives is

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up to us, it is a choice. Will we perceive and share the joy that is in us and abounds all around us with others?

I pray so. Amen.