

3rd Sunday of Advent (Year A)*Isaiah 35:1-10*

*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.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.*

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'*

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;*

*they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

The crocus is a peculiar plant that tends to blossom in the very late of winter or early spring. It is not unusual to see its purple or blue flower emerge from the snow-covered ground as winter's grasp begins to relinquish its hold over the frozen soil. After months of being covered by a blanket of snow and ice, the blooming of the crocus is often the first sign that winter is coming to an end and spring is right around the corner.

I will *never* forget my first winter on Long Island. Perhaps you remember it, too. It was the winter of 2014/2015 and it was a doozy. The first snow happened around this time in early December and Tricia and I were thrilled. It was so magical! I must admit, my excitement probably extended way beyond hers because, after all, Tricia did spend seven years of her life growing up in Denver. Nevertheless, we delighted at the sight of our new home covered in snow in amounts that we rarely saw growing up down South. The second time it snowed, we again greeted it with excitement.

Then Monday, January 26th, 2015 happened. Yes, I remember the exact date. It was the day that we received 26 inches of snow in a matter of about 12 hours. The day before, I had balked when, after that Sunday's service, my wife told me that we were expected to receive more than 20 inches the next day. I laughed. That's absurd, I said.

Well, Monday came and with it the snow. Shortly after dinner time, the snow began to fall. We were more excited than nervous; this was to be our first official snow storm as newly indoctrinated Long Islanders! This was to be our playful "hazing" that we would remember fondly. Surely, the massive snowfall would come and then it would melt a day or two later because, you know, that's what's supposed to happen.

The next morning we woke up and there was 26 inches of snow on the ground. We took pictures and uploaded them to Facebook to show our friends down south. Elsie, who just a young puppy at the time, frolicked around in the snow that was well over her head. Tricia and I made a snowman. It was fun.

But then the snow stayed. We woke up the next day at it was still there. Then a day turned into a week and the snow was still there. Then a week turned into a month and the snow was still there. Then February turned into March and the snow *was still there*. My back was getting tired of shoveling snow. I was getting frustrated with the constant trail of melted snow that inevitably covered our kitchen whenever someone came in from outside. Our back porch, which was supposed to serve as our "buffer" between the house and the snow, became itself covered in several inches, rendering its benefits useless. Because of the snowdrift and ice accumulation, I was forced to back Tricia's car out of the garage at an angle and I put a dent in the side.

Needless to say, the novelty of the snow had worn off.

The barrenness had begun. There was no color on the island, just white snow which eventually turned into a grayish brownish ice.

I don't remember seeing a crocus that April, but if I had seen one and knew what it represented, I probably would have dropped to my knees and wept with joy.

I don't know if this upcoming winter is going to be a relentless one or not. But if it is, I will eagerly look for that crocus, that promise that life is coming and that winter will, eventually, come to an end.

Today, we light the candle for joy. Like the purple crocus that emerges from a blanket of snow, the candle for joy is the lone pink candle surrounded by its blue brethren. Joy stands apart because sometimes it erupts in unexpected or long-anticipated ways.

A beautiful crocus bloomed in my life last night. As many of you know, I have long struggled with depression. And I, like many other people, perhaps some people in this very room, find this time of year to be particularly challenging. The holidays can be a difficult time of year. Plus, it's getting colder. The sun goes down at an obscenely early hour. It can be tough. I had been having a rough couple of days. Sleep was not coming easily to me. Tricia and I were planning to have two friends over on Friday night but both had things come up that prevented them from coming over.

But then I got a text message from my best friend, Joseph, who is a Presbyterian pastor in North Carolina; he and I went to both college and seminary together. He and I haven't spoken as much lately because he recently became a father a couple months ago and apparently, you know, babies are needy.

However, yesterday, his infant son and his wife were out of town and he had the house to himself. So we sat down yesterday evening and skyped for over an hour, just the two of us. We played catch up. We shared about the joys and struggles of being pastors. I asked him how fatherhood was treating him and how it was changing the way he preached and pastored. He asked how Tricia and I were doing and I said we were fine but having a bit of a lonely weekend. We laughed. We had a few emotional moments. We smiled and, for a few moments at least, it didn't feel as though a thousand miles separated us. As the conversation came to a close and we decided to call it a night, we both reminded each other that our baptisms were sufficient for our callings and we said we loved each other. I went to bed last night holding a beautiful crocus that bloomed in a cold, mid-winter's night.

That crocus, reminded me that our most supreme joys are not found in objects, or belongings, or professional accomplishments, or what else have you. Our most supreme joys are found in one another. In relationships. In the strengthening and sustainment of the connections with one another that make us human. In the moments when we hold one another, when we laugh with one another, when we cry with and for one another. *Those* moments are the *real* joys in our life. Those are the "crocuses" that bloom into our lives when we need them the most.

On this third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday on which we light the pink candle for joy, I am reminded that the Church, of all places, should be the place where joyful relationships are fostered. You and I are called to be practitioners of right relationships. No, that doesn't mean that we are expected to be perfect in being in relationship with each other. There is no such thing as a Church of people who are perfectly in relationship with each other without flaw, or ill will, or disagreement. We are not expected to be perfect in being in relationship with each other. But we should be expected to try harder, and to strive to live into the perfect relationship that we have in Christ Jesus in his relationship in the Trinity.

This blessed season of Advent tingles with anticipation as we expect Christ to come into our lives. We light the candle for hope and we hope. We light the candle for peace and we become peacemakers. We light the candle for joy and we look for it, we stop and we ponder its beauty in our hearts when it breaks forth from its snowy blanket. We find joy and we share it with others because that's what we're called to do. Call it whatever you want. Call it being a Christian (though we have no monopoly on it, for sure). Call it discipleship. Call it being a good human. Call it "the right thing to do." Call it whatever you

want to call it. But know this: God created each and every one of us to live in right relationship, *joyful* right relationships with each other. But we can't do that on our own. So God sent Jesus. Sweet, little baby Jesus.

God sent Jesus, God-with-us, that we might live in right relationship with each other. And so, we light the candle for joy because there is no higher joy than the joy we find in Jesus Christ and the joy he finds in us. That is a right relationship and you and I both know that this world is not lacking in its need for right relationships.

Wouldn't it be nice if when people heard the phrase "Shelter Island Presbyterian Church" the first thing that came to mind was something like this: "man, those people are all about maintaining and growing together in joyful relationships! I mean, they're not perfect, but they are obsessed with sharing joy with one another. I want to be a part of that!"

That would be a nice reputation to have, wouldn't it?

So, today, let us celebrate the joy we have in the crocus of Christ. Let us celebrate that Jesus is coming into our hearts. Let us have joy because, shortly, heaven will no longer be "above." Let us celebrate the crocus of Christ and share that joy with one another because that joy is WAY too big to be contained in this room! That joy, that relationship, that steadfast love, is way too big to stay with us. We shouldn't hold on to it, we should share it. After all, there's plenty to go around!

I'd like to close today with a poem which is, in fact, a hymn in our hymnal. It's a hymn by Natalie Sleeth that was written in 1986.¹ If you're curious, it's number 250 in our hymnal. I'd like to share it with you because its words embody the "Christ crocus," that fleshly joy that we anticipate in the coming weeks:

*In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

*There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
there's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

*In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Text: Natalie Sleeth, 1986. Text copyright 1986 by Hope Publishing Company.