

**FIRST READING: Luke 2:8-11 NRSVUE**

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

**SECOND READING Isaiah 35:1-7a, 10 The Message****The Voiceless Break into Song**

Wilderness & desert will sing joyously, the badlands will celebrate & flower—Like the crocus in spring, bursting into blossom, a symphony of song & color. Mountain glories of Lebanon—a gift. Awesome Carmel, stunning Sharon—gifts. God’s resplendent glory, fully on display. God awesome, God majestic.

Energize the limp hands, strengthen the rubbery knees. Tell fearful souls, “Courage! Take heart! God is here, right here, on his way to put things right & redress all wrongs. He’s on his way! He’ll save you!”

Blind eyes will be opened, deaf ears unstopped, lame men and women will leap like deer, the voiceless break into song. Springs of water will burst out in the wilderness, streams flow in the desert. Hot sands will become a cool oasis, thirsty ground a splashing fountain.

God’s people will sing as they make their way home to Zion, unfading halos of joy encircling their heads, welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night.

*This is the joy-filled Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God!*

I think sometimes the expectations of “joy” at this time of year can create a lot of problems and struggles for people. Forced expectations of joy in this blitzing holiday season can sometimes highlight what is wrong or missing in people’s lives. Especially if we see a stark contrast between our lives and what is presented as a cultural norm; we can feel isolated & depressed, or perhaps even frustrated and angry.

In other words we could be singing and hearing, “Tis the season to be jolly, Fa la la la la, la la la la!” WELL...not if you’ve just been laid off, Not if this is your 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas without your loved one & certainly not if you’re dealing with a serious medical issue.

And yet on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, we are called to receive the life-giving gift of joy from God that brings us a means, a way, an opportunity of wholeness & connection that is exactly what we may need this Christmas season. Joy—we sing about it, we read about it—but what does it really look like? Joy is one of those “intangibles” I named last week, like peace & hope. So what does it mean to receive joy? To embody joy?

\*First off it’s important to know that joy is not a surface-level happy—Joy is deeply seated in one’s character and inner-being. For me, joy may not always manifest itself in smiles and laughter—but rather joy is revealed in one’s grace and assurance even amidst difficult, chaotic & uncertain times.

\*A mentor once told me that joy could be described as—Knowing something better exists. Joy is knowing something better exists—and for him—joy came by actively searching, discovering, & then holding onto that which is better.

In both Scripture lessons, we get to understand this kind of joy I think. The prophet Isaiah highlights the contrasting nature that sometimes comes with the concept of joy. He reveals that in opposition to brokenness, wrongs, sorrows and sighs; God will prevail and one day all will be well. “Something **better** exists...know this...trust this...wait for it... it’s coming” says the prophet. How Advent-like!

Listen to the grace-filled assurance from the prophet Isaiah:

- Wilderness and desert will sing joyously.
- Limp hands will be energized.
- Rubbery knees strengthened.
- Blind eyes will be opened.
- Deaf ears unstopped.
- The lame will leap like deer.
- And the voiceless will break into song.

What incredible contrasting images from the Prophet to God’s people who were going through a difficult time in their faith journey. Isaiah reminds God’s people living in exile, amidst much sorrow & pain to live in joy knowing, trusting something better exists, & indeed, they will find & then must hold onto that which is better. Isaiah continues: “Have courage! Take heart! God is here, right here, on his way to put things right and redress all wrongs. God’s on His way! He’ll save you!” (35:3-4)

This is not a surface-level happiness that Isaiah’s talking about...but a deep-seated joy. God promises to welcome all home with gifts of joy and gladness—as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night. That a promise we need to hear right now as well? Amen?

This is repeated in Luke's Gospel as read earlier when the angel of the Lord appeared to frightened shepherds & said: *"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."* (Lk 2:10)

This is the Life-Giving gift of joy made real thru the grace & assurance of Jesus the Christ...Emmanuel—our God is with us! Oh my friends, God sent an incredible gift into the world, the gift of His loving presence...flesh and blood...God's own Son to come and be WITH US. The greatest gift of joy ever!

If you really think about it...Jesus is truly the gift that keeps on giving...the one who helps us find the "better" things, the "better" way in life. All the Gospel stories indicate that Jesus physically gave few material things to people.

~Jesus didn't carve out a set of wooden bowls & plates for his disciples.

~Jesus didn't lavish anointing perfume upon people.

~He didn't buy fine cloaks for those who hosted him.

No. What Jesus abundantly gave was his **personal presence**...a deep seated joy of "being with" you no matter what was going on all around you or inside you. Jesus' gifts were, and still are, treasures of the heart; such as: belief in self, inner healing, peace of mind, compassion, forgiveness, dignity and justice. So now we're back again to some of those more **intangible** gifts. Right?

Scripture is full of such examples:

~We know Jesus' personal presence in the life of his disciples was transformational. We only know a small fraction of the conversations they had while walking along the road or sharing meals during the 3 years of his public ministry.

~We know His gift of being with the children as they came to him,

~His gift to the blind, deaf & lame, the widowed & orphaned, the crowds & religious leaders—the life-giving gift of Christ's presence changed lives and transformed the world. **Being with** Jesus is the greatest Gift!

That's the awesome, deep-seated joy that we need to remember, seek, discover, and claim this Advent season. That's why no matter what may be going on in our lives, no matter the struggles we are dealing with, or pain we may be in the midst of—we can have courage and take heart! God is here, right here, always on His way to make things better, to put things right & redress all wrongs. Jesus saves! Savior of the world...saving each of us...one life at a time...even one moment to the next...to the next.

This is the Life-Giving gift that comes through the Christ Child—the joy of God being with us. And Jesus’ loving presence lives-on within us, and moves through us...as we claim him as Lord and Savior.

Oh my friends, the opportunity & capacity for joy grows even more...when we see **ourselves** as a gift holding the goodness, hope & peace of Jesus who is Emmanuel—God with us. We know that sharing this gift of personal presence—of “being with”—can be an incredible gift of **joy** for another person. Like Jesus, we too can give from our inner abundance, Life-Giving gifts from the heart.

Moments lovingly spent with another carry more beauty and have more endurance than anything material we could give. Remember, it is the gift of “being with” that can be transformational. What greater gift could we share than ones that reflect the Great Love we have known in the person of Jesus: our care and concern, our hope, our joy, our understanding and forgiveness, our kindness, our patience?

When I think of my own hurried, often chaotic pace of life, I see myself as deeply entrenched in our culture. I look & can see how Advent gets lost in “the Christmas rush”. The messages are all around me, “Buy this and you will be happy. Oh Gina...Buy THAT, yes that! For your spouse, your daughter, OH THAT right there for your grandkids... BUT THAT...and you WILL prove your love!” Is this only a ME-thing...or do others hear such gremlins?

\*Sharing presence is hard to do in a culture that keeps promoting material things as a sign of how much we love others. Sharing presence is difficult in an environment that encourages us to be as busy as possible so that we will be rich, successful & important-AND then able to buy more things.

Friends, Advent is the time to be more deliberate in sharing the gift...the present of our presence every day. It’s what so many did at the Carol Sing-Along at the Medford care center last weekend. 27 residents & some of their family members experienced the life-giving gifts of Christmas: hope, peace, love and joy through the gift of singing. And did they ever! Allan Estrin shared pictures & stories of the joy-filled gift of being with so many that afternoon. 20 members and friends of FMC joyfully participated in the telling of the birth of the Savior of the world through song. This gift of “being with” is priceless!

“Being with” is a deep seated joy that helps reveal something better exists.

- For a resident with no family to share Christmas cheer.
- For the opportunity to sing together or hear again about the birth of the Savior of the world.

- For the joy of seeing ourselves as a gift holding the goodness, hope and love of Jesus...for others to unwrap. PRICELESS!

Advent is the time to be more deliberate in sharing the present of our presence each day. It may be through a phone call, a letter, a visit, thru prayer or helping others...as we focus love and attention toward those who need the strength & presence of God to be with them. How can we “be with” others today? “Being with” others during Advent...can be one of the greatest gifts of joy we ever give.

\*Is God calling you to go to Camden on December 28th in the morning with the outreach ministry—Eyes of Our Hearts, to be with the homeless and those in need serving a Christmas breakfast? Judi Angelow the founder of this ministry is all about sharing the presence of Christ in joy- filled ways! That Saturday Rich & I will be joining her & others to offer the gift of presence & a hot meal.

\*Is God calling you to bring a grieving loved one to this afternoon’s holiday service of remembrance in the Chapel at 3:00 PM?

With the power of Emmanuel’s presence within you and me, we are given the ability to warm the lives of others because of this Gift of joy. “Being With” is transformational, and its not that hard! Being with someone can mean your physical presence...but it can also mean being present “in Spirit.” meaning through the gift of prayer, compassionate thoughts, and kind feelings toward another person or group.

In Christ, we are the Life-Giving gifts of JOY to a hurting & needy world.

Be with someone who needs you.

Be with a person who gives you hope.

Be with those who live in terror and fear.

Be with an older person.

Be with someone who has helped you to grow.

Be with one who is in pain.

Be with a war-torn country.

Be with yourself.

Be with someone who has written you...or texted you.

Be with a child.

Be with an enemy or someone you don’t like.

Be with the homeless.

Be with those who suffer from substance abuse.

Be with hungry children.

Be with a coworker.

Be with those whose hope is faint.

Be with world leaders.  
Be with someone in your family.  
Be with someone working for justice.  
Be with those who are abused.  
Be with your loved ones.

Oh...the joy of “Being With”! Life-Giving Gifts that can change the world...one person...one moment...at a time! May it be so! Amen and Amen!