

Luke 1:39-45-55

Happy Rose Sunday - Advent III. Today we light the third candle on our Advent wreaths – the lovely pink or rose candle – the candle of Joy. Usually, we speak of the joy of Mary on this day – the joy she had to be the mother of Jesus- the Christ-child, as she anticipated his birth. And we read today in the Gospel of Luke of the joyful encounter between the pregnant cousins - Elizabeth and Mary. You will notice that the first one who is filled with joy according to the text, is actually baby John the Baptist. Elizabeth, who is near the end of her pregnancy, describes her babe as “leaping for joy” in her womb when John hears the voice of Mary. And then the pregnant and prophetic Mary describes her own soul “rejoicing” in God her Savior.

Reading this story, I was reminded of my own pregnancies this week – they were times of waiting, anxiety, and physical hardship, as well as great joy. Pregnancy, in that way, is an apt metaphor for most of life. But one of my favorite parts about being pregnant was singing to my unborn children every night before going to sleep. (I think I hoped that singing would cause them to settle and sleep so that I could sleep.) When I was pregnant with Charlotte, I sang “Jesus loves me” to her every night (to a unique tune – not the one most of us know). After she was born, I switched to some different songs (I think I had gotten tired of Jesus Loves Me) but I remember one night when she was still very young I sang her “Jesus Loves Me” again before bed – and she looked up at me and gasped and said, “Mommy – isn’t that the song you used to sing when I was in your tummy?” My eyes really grew wide -I said, “Yes, every night I sang that to you. Do you remember that?” She said, “Yeah, I remember it – but I remember being in the dark and there was an orange glow - and hearing your voice.” I still wonder about that- was she really remembering something from the womb? Maybe so. But one of the reasons I sang during pregnancy was because the doctors said that in later pregnancy babies can hear voices from inside the womb. Certainly, this story from Luke indicates that John the Baptist could hear Mary’s voice from the womb – the voice of God’s chosen one, whom Elizabeth described as “Blessed among women.” It is a reminder of God’s ministering presence to us at every age and stage. And there is such joy in this encounter- for Mary, Elizabeth, and baby

John because of who Jesus is – the Son of God coming into the world to bring salvation for all people. It seems as though the presence of God was felt and heard by all who encountered them.

Joy, of course, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, it is a gift from God according to Christian teaching. My son Graysen has a certificate on his door from his preschool because the teachers there wanted to acknowledge his gift of “Joy” and so actually wrote about this trait of joy on a certificate for him. Graysen is very proud of this – being the enthusiastic and joyfully energetic boy that he is. And I have often thought how I’d like to borrow some of his joyful energy.... but I was reminded this week that the gift of joy can be mine – and it can be yours- it can be all of ours. And we don’t have to be St. Mary, or John the Baptist or Graysen Dinovo to have and know deep joy.

So how do we attain joy? Or get more joy in our lives? What really is joy? First, it’s important to distinguish between joy and happiness.... joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is more of an emotion – happiness is transitory and is generally related to our circumstances, but joy is deeper -it can be present regardless of what’s going on around us – like a flame that God has lit in our hearts that does not get extinguished by circumstances. Joy is more of an inner state of being at our core. In Scripture the word “joy” is almost always related to God’s Spirit and God’s activity. Think about when have you experienced or been aware of joy in your heart? I can recall times in my life when it seemed like everything around me was a mess, but I still felt that flame of joy as if for no discernable reason – which I could tell did not originate with me- it was a pure gift. Joy is connected to our faith in this way and is a spiritual attribute – and part of joy is knowing and trusting that we are God’s no matter what happens.

But honestly, it feels rather audacious to me to even speak about joy today. There is just so much suffering and grief around us – we’ve been through nearly 2 years of struggle with the pandemic and the news is now filled with warnings about the latest variant and people still don’t agree on how we should respond, meanwhile we continue to experience the divisive culture wars and strident disagreements about how to save our democracy, and people’s emotional health is really suffering as a result of it all. As a parent of a

teenager, I could only nod in absolute agreement when I read the dire warnings that came out this week from the US Surgeon General about the crisis of mental health among our youth. I have the pleasure (honestly) of being around groups of teenagers a lot at our house – Charlotte’s friends are with us multiple times a week - and there is no doubt of the struggles they’re facing. My friends – this is not an easy time to be navigating life for any of us. We may wonder whether it’s even possible to embrace and experience joy at a time like this, at a time when it seems to allude so many of us.

How can I talk about joy today? Well - frankly, I felt compelled to speak on the topic of joy today precisely because things have been so difficult. Scripture tells us the joy of the Lord is our strength...and we need God’s strength. I truly believe that God is calling us to seek out God’s joy this Advent, despite our circumstances and, I believe, to specifically recall that joy is often preceded by suffering.

You see, the Bible mentions joy over 200 times and when joy is referenced, it is often, rather mysteriously, connected to the suffering or grief that preceded it. Psalm 30:5: “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.” Psalm 126:5: “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.” In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus ties mourning and poverty of spirit to the joys and comfort of the Kingdom of Heaven. Later in the Gospels, suffering and grief precede the joy of the women at the empty tomb- just as the sorrow of Good Friday itself precedes Easter joy. Matthew 28:8 reads, “And the women departed quickly from the sepulcher with fear and great joy.... “

St. Paul speaks of joy being tied to suffering and trials in his second letter to the church in Corinth when he writes in chapter 8: “...we want you to know about the grace that God has given the... churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy.... welled up....” And finally, Peter’s first epistle in chapter 1 reads: “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” Grief – suffering and joy go together throughout Scripture. And we can find great comfort in knowing that the suffering we experience is not an end in itself nor is it disconnected from God’s purposes or our ability to ultimately experience deep joy.

Notice the joy that Mary describes in the Gospel is rooted in the plans and will of God-this is key. Mary had faith that God was working out her salvation and the salvation of her people, who had suffered greatly. Mary’s role was to simply accept in faith the call God had given her in the midst of it. Like Mary, we too can experience joy when we accept and live by faith the call that God has put on our hearts in the midst of suffering. Suffering is not a dead end or the final word - it is temporary and it can actually give way and give birth to joy within us. This is God’s doing. As we prepare for Christ this Advent and “make room for him” in our hearts- we are making room for joy. Pray for and expect the gift of joy from God in faith. Rejoice with Mary and John the Baptist because of what God has done and is doing in and through his Son Jesus Christ. Rejoice in the Lord always- and again I say – rejoice! Amen.