

Good News of Great Joy: Third Advent
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NPMC – Dec. 12, 2021

Scripture: Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 1:26-38 (Annunciation)

Hymns: Voices Together 221, VT 238, VT 847

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations; proclaim that God's name is exalted.

Sing praises to the LORD, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

You may be familiar with Marie Kondo, the Japanese organization expert and promoter of minimalist living. She wrote a book called *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* and has a TV show based on it as well, in which she helps people who are overrun by chaotic disorganization and too much stuff. Among her techniques for sorting one's possessions and deciding which ones to keep, she recommends taking each one in

one's hands and asking, "does this spark joy?" If it does, it goes in the "keep" pile, but if it doesn't it gets thanked for its service and goes in the "donate" pile.

I thought of Marie Kondo and her question this week as we look to the theme for this Third Advent Sunday, which is Joy. At the risk of seeming irreverent, I wonder if this theme prompts us to hold some of our Advent and Christmas traditions in our hands, so to speak, and ask ourselves, "does this spark joy?" That's not a question we tend to associate with our spiritual lives, necessarily, even at this time of year. There are certainly Advent materials that stress this time of waiting as a sombre time of reflecting on judgment and deferring any whisper of celebration until Christmas itself. So to reflect on joy today, when it's only Third Advent, seems to throw all of that out the window! Aren't we jumping ahead a bit? There are still twelve days until Christmas! Yet we know what we are waiting for with great anticipation is the good news of great joy that the angels will announce to the shepherds, something which inspires great rejoicing at God's love and grace made flesh.

Our passage from Isaiah 12 for today certainly doesn't shy away from joy. This passage begins with throwing off fear and turning to God for encouragement and strengthening. "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation." And this empowering salvation is linked with gratitude, praise, and joy: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation," it says. "And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations." "Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." This joy is to one's

soul what water is to the thirsty: a deep well that quenches our pains and sorrows, comfort that brings us strength and casts out fear. This joy is more profound than mere happiness, and overflows into praise in the form of shouts and songs to God. When was the last time you shouted for joy? I know certain kids who do this all the time... This seems to be a downright delirious joy!

But I'm going to put on my grammar nerd hat (again) here and point out the verb tenses in this passage. This takes place in the future; this joy is one that is coming, that is up ahead: "With joy you WILL draw water from the wells of salvation. And you WILL say IN THAT DAY: Give thanks to the Lord." This passage is one of looking forward to future joy, then, to the songs and shouts of joy that are on the horizon. But it would seem that this joy is so close that Isaiah can already taste it. Looking forward to joy is itself a joyful experience!

This kind of excitement at future joy is why it makes sense to focus on joy for Third Advent Sunday. Pastor April Fiet writes, "There's a joy that comes when the destination is in sight. There's a joy that accompanies the realization that comfort and rest are on the horizon." So this Sunday's "joy candle" is not premature, but rather "celebrates being over halfway through the expectant season of Advent. It's an encouragement that we're almost there, that our waiting is almost at an end," like reaching the last, familiar stretch of road before arriving home after a long journey.¹

In these Covid days, though, she observes that "The joy of 'We're almost there' has been replaced with an anguished 'Are we there yet?'" We keep thinking we've reached the home stretch only to find there's another long road before we get there. We

¹ See Rev. April Fiet, "Advent for Uncertain Hearts – Week 3 – Joy at Arm's Length," Nov. 26, 2021, accessed Dec. 6, 2021, https://aprilfiet.com/my-thoughts/advent-for-uncertain-hearts-week-3-joy-at-arms-length?fbclid=IwAR2lUr9l3U3Kbn8M2LDo2tIPV1HiSB4e_pw8_f_v4tM66mElhEeft9X_h-k

struggle with joy around this time, because we “feel guilty delighting in things when others are suffering. How can I rejoice when someone else is experiencing the pain of a loved one being in the hospital and being unable to be with them? How can I feel delight when business owners are forced to close their doors? How can I justify smiling at the sound of the birds in the trees or the scent of fresh baked bread when neighbours are sick, families are separated, and so much brokenness exists in the world?”²



And yet, we know that as human beings, we need joy; we can't exist without it. And in fact, joy can be a sign of great faith, especially in the midst of challenging circumstances. Joy can be what sustains us, enabling us to make it through those

challenges. In *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu discuss this very thing. It's remarkable that these two spiritual leaders who have each been through so much (exile from Tibet and South African apartheid, respectively), remain so joyful, especially in their profound friendship with one another. If you look up photos or videos of these two, they are often holding hands and laughing, teasing each other and joking around. In one interview, Tutu turns to the Dalai Lama and says, “Hey, the

² April Fiet, “Advent for Uncertain Hearts – Week 3 – Joy at Arm's Length.”

cameras are on us, act like a *holy man*.”³ Spirituality and religion have the reputation of being very serious business, and yet these two spiritual leaders who are respected around the world are filled with such joy. Douglas Abrams says to them in the book, “For the two of you, joy seems to be something ... enduring. Your spiritual practice hasn’t made you somber and serious. It’s made you more joyful.” Tutu observes that his friend the Dalai Lama has lived in exile from his home in Tibet since 1959. “Why are you not morose?” he asks him. Well, the Dalai Lama answers, he recognized his own suffering and that of his people, of course, but he also saw that other people are suffering. “As we recognize others’ suffering and realize that we are not alone, our pain is lessened. ... This recognition that we are all connected – whether Tibetan Buddhists or Hui Muslims – is the birth of empathy and compassion.” He also recognized the “new opportunities” that exile has afforded him, especially to build relationships with many different people. “There’s a Tibetan saying, ‘Wherever you have friends that’s your country, and wherever you receive love, that’s your home.’”⁴ This is a type of joy, then, that transcends even situations of suffering. Like the Israelite prophet Isaiah preaching in Babylon, it is about finding joy even while still in exile.

Our passage from Luke 1, the well-known Annunciation narrative, likewise contains glimpses of joy on the horizon. Twice in greeting Mary, the angel Gabriel speaks of God’s favour: “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.” And when she is confused about why she is being called God’s favoured one, the angel repeats: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.” Now this term “favour” is a

³ Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (Toronto: Viking, Penguin Random House Canada, 2016), 7.

⁴ *Book of Joy*, 34-35, 37-38.

loaded one in the Bible. Just a few chapters later, in Luke 4, Jesus' first sermon in his home synagogue will be about how he is "proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour," which was another word for the Jubilee year, in which there would be a great re-set on Israelite society to bring about justice and liberation. In the Hebrew, this word for favour is *chesed*, meaning loving-kindness, loyalty, generosity, and a keeping of promises. It's the word used for Ruth's actions toward her mother-in-law Naomi, whom she refuses to abandon, but instead is loyal to, in her loving-kindness.⁵

So when the angel visits Mary speaking about God's favour starting with her, this is the joyful promise that Mary is being given! God has chosen her to begin to fulfill the promise of Good News, to embody the joy of salvation being on its way, of being in the home stretch in the journey toward peace on earth. The fulfillment of God's *chesed*, God's loving-kindness, will begin with her. But we don't know if Mary is joyful as she takes on this task. We hear that she's perplexed at the angel's greeting, that she questions the logistics of the plan, and that she accepts her commissioning to bear Jesus. But it's not until she goes to see Elizabeth and hears her joyful greeting that Mary herself bursts into joyful song, singing her great hymn, the Magnificat, in which she thanks God for showing her favour, and for the joyful Jubilee justice that is just there, on its way, rising like the sun on the horizon.

The fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich is someone whose wisdom I have returned to many times during this pandemic, in part because she too lived through plagues and wrote timeless words of faith and comfort to those under her spiritual leadership. Julian wrote that "the fullness of joy... is to see God in everything."⁶

⁵ See *The Bible Project* for a video about this word and its meaning: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/loyal-love/>

⁶ Quoted in April Fiet, "Advent for Uncertain Hearts – Week 3 – Joy at Arm's Length."

When she envisioned heaven, it was a banquet table of everyone seated with Jesus, and everyone is laughing out of sheer delight. “Then I saw the Lord ... reign there, and he completely filled it with joy and mirth. He himself endlessly gladdens and solaces his valued friends ... with the marvelous melody of endless love in his own fair, blessed face. This glorious countenance of the godhead completely fills all heaven with joy and bliss.”⁷ As we mark this Third Advent Sunday, may we find joy in looking forward to abundant rejoicing, knowing that God is a God of loving-kindness, and that God’s good news of great joy is on its way, and is already here among us. AMEN

⁷ “Blessed Julian of Norwich,” in *Prayers of the Women Mystics*, ed. Rhonda De Sola Chervin (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992), 75-76.