

Embracing Joy: Third Advent
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Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10; and Luke 1:46-55 (Mary's Magnificat).

Hymns: Joy to the World - VT 240; My Soul Proclaims with Wonder - VT 222; and O Come, O Come Immanuel - VT 210 (select verses)

Isaiah 35:1-10:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and shouting.
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.]]
³ Strengthen the weak hands
and make firm the feeble knees.
⁴ 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.”
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;
⁶ 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;
⁷ 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.
⁸ 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 traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
⁹ 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.
¹⁰ 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.

Luke 1:46-55:

⁴⁶ And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowly state
of his servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me
blessed,
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for
me,
and holy is his name;
⁵⁰ indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of
their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their
thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our
ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Ross Gay is a U.S. essayist and poet whose subject matter may seem unexpected. He has published such titles as, *Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitude*, *The Book of Delights*, and, most recently, *Inciting Joy*, a book of essays (2022). In the introduction to the latter, he recalls someone coming up to him after a reading and expressing surprise that essays could even be written on joy. “I had always been told that you can’t write about joy because it isn’t serious,” this person, a young university student, had told him. In other words, given everything that’s wrong in the world today, isn’t it sort of shallow or frivolous to talk about joy? Gay concludes that it is in fact “dangerous” and “sad” to think of joy as some kind of escape from the rest of life. He writes, “because we often of joy as ‘without pain’ or ‘without sorrow’ – which...our consumer culture has us believing is a state of being that we could buy – not only is it sometimes considered ‘unserious’ or frivolous to talk about joy (*i.e.*, *But there’s so much pain in the world!*), but this definition also suggests that someone might be able to live without ...heartbreak or sorrow. ... But what happens if joy is not separate from pain? What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another? Or even more to the point, what if joy is...what emerges from how we care for each another *through* those things? What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks?”¹

These accusations of not being “serious” or realistic, perhaps even of being naïve, could be levelled at any of our Advent themes, and often are. We’ve spoken of hope, peace, joy, and next week is love. Why do we bother speaking of these pie-in-the-sky notions when there is so much trouble and sorrow, fear and pain in the world today?

¹ Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy: Essays* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2022), “The First Incitement,” https://www.google.ca/books/edition/Inciting_Joy/G3NhEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover

Well, because, as Gay says, these are the very things that get us through the hard stuff, and sustain and strengthen us to work at the problems we see in our world. Joy seems to be more profound than we realize, more deeply connected to our humanity. Joy and these other things are thus no less real – and no less contagious. As we will see, sharing joy multiplies it, so that there is abundant joy, more than enough for all. So when Gay asks, “what does joy incite?,” he answers: “My hunch is that joy is an ember for or precursor to wild and unpredictable and transgressive and unboundaried solidarity. And that that solidarity might incite further joy. Which might incite further solidarity. And on and on.”² In other words, as poet Mary Oliver puts it, “joy is not made to be a crumb.”³

Our Scripture for today consists of two ancient poems about joy, and both have something to tell us about the character of Advent joy. The first comes to us from the prophet Isaiah, who offers beautiful imagery here of the desert bursting into bloom, of the very land itself singing for joy:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and shouting (Isaiah 35:1-2).

Bible commentator Cory Driver speaks of this as no less than garden imagery, bringing to mind the Garden of Eden and the beginning of creation. In one sense, then, Isaiah is envisioning going back to the garden, the restoration of paradise. Driver writes, “is this a vision of ecological restoration? We can certainly read it that way. The wilderness and

² Gay, *Inciting Joy*, “The First Incitement.”

³ Mary Oliver, “Don’t Hesitate,” *Devotions* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 61. Cited in: <https://thedeepeningground.com/2021/03/11/devotions-with-mary-oliver-dont-hesitate/>

desert will blossom abundantly (Isaiah 35:2). Indeed, the character of the wilderness will be wholly changed to resemble Lebanon, with its famous forests; Mount Carmel, associated with rainfall, forests and wildflowers; and the Plain of Sharon, one of the most fertile areas in the Holy Land. Isaiah speaks of abundant water welling up in the formerly desert places (Isaiah 35:6-7) that leads to changes first in flora and then in fauna. As grasses and plants grow, no longer will jackals and lions stalk the barren landscape (Isaiah 35:7, 9). Does the prophet look forward to a time of ecological change, when desert landscapes and ecosystems will be rearranged to make a new garden in which God and humans will dwell together?”⁴

But what makes this Edenic imagery so remarkable is that these words come to us from a decidedly un-heavenly time in the history of the Israelites – namely, the exile in Babylon. The Israelites have been defeated and captured by their enemies and taken to a strange land far from their home. This is a very sorrowful, painful time for them as they long to return to the land of Israel, long for their nation and peoplehood to be restored. So it is into this situation that Isaiah speaks words of abundant, flowering, overflowing joy! Since the exiles long to return through the desert to their homeland, Isaiah paints this beautiful picture of the desert blooming and rejoicing with them as they return home on a road through the wilderness. The once-hostile desert has become the site of a joyful return, as the Israelites effectively dance their way home to the celebratory music of all of creation! This then becomes, says Driver, a “preview” of the return to their homeland, “a Second Exodus in which God once again leads the Holy

⁴ Cory Driver, “Commentary on Isaiah 35:1-10,” *Working Preacher*, Dec. 11, 2022, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-isaiah-351-10-6>, para. 3.

Community through wastelands to re-inhabit the promised land.”⁵ Isaiah says, they
“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 (v. 10).

What a powerful image of this hope for future rejoicing and celebration that embraces
even the land itself!

Our second Scripture passage for today consists of the familiar song of joy from
Mary of Nazareth, known as her “Magnificat,” after the first few words in Latin: “my soul
magnifies the Lord.” Mary has received the perplexing message from the angel, given
her consent to undertake this strange task, and then has in essence fled to her cousin
Elizabeth’s home. When Elizabeth greets her with words of blessing, the reality of what
is happening seems to sink in, for Mary. With the embrace of Elizabeth and Elizabeth’s
blessing of what is happening to Mary, she seems to “catch” Elizabeth’s joy. It is only
then that Mary bursts into this song of rejoicing! But perhaps this song is not what we’d
expect a pregnant woman to be singing about (and in fact, it has been banned before
for its radical nature). The “longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the
New Testament,”⁶ it encompasses theological, economic, and political changes that
make up the “good news of great joy” that has begun with her. It is a prophetic song of
the coming of justice and peace in very concrete and transformative ways.

Commentator Elizabeth Johnson puts it this way: “What does it mean to rejoice in God

⁵ Driver, para. 2.

⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 263.

your Saviour? This is not a superficial joy but is written against the whole canvas of the world's pain. It is messianic joy, paschal joy, aware of the struggle unto death yet hopeful that the great 'nevertheless' of God leads to life." Mary thus rejoices in God with her whole self, "mind, body, and strength," as she embodies this hope and joy.⁷ What's remarkable again, as in Isaiah, is that this is a song of joy to come – it has not yet been realized, even if it's already begun. But from the embrace of these two women, they each gain strength: "Their mutual encouragement enabled them to go forward with more confidence and joy despite the struggle that still faced them." Here, Johnson says, we have two "spirit-filled pregnant prophets crying out in joy, warning, and hope for the future."⁸ In embracing each other, they have embraced the joy they embody in their pregnancies and their prophetic words alike. They have made space to carry within themselves and bring to birth God's good news of great joy.

As we move further into this Advent season, how are we making room for joy? How are we embracing joy? Returning to Ross Gay, he speaks about the "practices, habits, rituals, understandings" that "make joy more available to us. What in our lives prepares the ground for joy"? How do we practice joy, and live it out? And, on the other side, he also wonders "what the feeling of joy makes us do, or how it makes us be," "how joy makes us act and feel," the way that it leads to solidarity and love.⁹ I wonder about practicing joy by sharing our joy with one another as a community, which we often do, especially at this time of year. In light of our Scripture passages, I encourage us to recognize the abundance of joy this season – the way that it is not based on scarcity,

⁷ Johnson, 265.

⁸ Johnson, 260.

⁹ Gay, *Inciting Joy*, "The First Incitement."

but on being shared and celebrated with all of creation, on being embraced with open arms, as Mary and Elizabeth embraced each other. This is what it means to practice – and therefore multiply – Advent joy.

I close with the words of Mary Oliver’s poem, “Don’t Hesitate,”:¹⁰

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy,
don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty
of lives and whole towns destroyed or about
to be. We are not wise, and not very often
kind. And much can never be redeemed.
Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this
is its way of fighting back, that sometimes
something happens better than all the riches
or power in the world. It could be anything,
but very likely you notice it in the instant
when love begins. Anyway, that's often the
case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid
of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

AMEN

¹⁰ Mary Oliver, “Don’t Hesitate,” *Devotions* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 61. Cited in: <https://thedeepeningground.com/2021/03/11/devotions-with-mary-oliver-dont-hesitate/>