

## The Season of Joy

A Dialogue Sermon written by Rev. Rachel Matthews

Preach by Revs. Matt & Rachel Matthews

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

Third Sunday of Advent

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Rachel: We are in the season of Joy, Matt. It is hard to believe. It's everywhere – the memory of joy, the absence of joy, and the making of joy. The third Sunday in Advent is the Sunday we look at joy.

Matt: The angels bring us glad tidings of great joy. “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” “Joy the World.” Memories and traditions all point to joy. Christmas trees, especially a tree like our church Chrismon tree, every ornament... reminds us of a story: personal stories, Jesus stories, stories of giving, stories of birth and new life.

R: And, the nativity scenes... Every time I look at the mother and child I can hear the clarity and sweetness of young Mary's song which became the Magnificat. “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed...” (Luke 1:46-48)

M: Each thing a memory of joy...

R: Our scripture reading today is a memory of joy...Psalm 126 recalls the memory of joy: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, ‘the Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.” (Psalm 126:1-3)

R: Yes, you know, this psalm was sung when there was an absence of joy.

M: Stories and poetry like the psalms help us remember joy when we are joyless. The Psalmist says, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negev. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” (Psalm 126:4-15)

R: “The psalmist was living in an unhappy time in his people's history.” (IBC, p.664) When his people were freed from Babylonian captivity, there had been

great rejoicing and laughter. Now those glad days were a dream, a memory. He and his people were depressed and so he prays for the return of joy.

M: Christmas is a paradoxical season: what is supposed to be a season of joy and a celebration of life, is sometimes dampened by depression and the shadow of death much like our psalmist's experience. Many people this Christmas will be saddened by circumstances beyond their control with this virus and its impact on our very real lives. Where does your sadness lie?

R: We must seek to reclaim glad tidings of great joy. We must because our souls yearn for it. Our lives depend on it. We are creatures whose very being depends upon dancing with our creator. Our spirits drink from God's laughter, without it we are empty.

M: Often, we misunderstand how true joy occurs. We try to find joy in what looks happy, what seems to make us feel good. Ironically, the temporary, the trappings, the things of this life inevitably just fill us with more tears. Sometimes all of those those things have to be stripped away before we can stand before God and realize our true joy is in the not knowing, the not having, the not holding, just in being with our God.

R: Wendy Wright wrote a story called, "Two Faces of Joy" by Wendy Wright. She was in a season of tears one Christmas but discovered Joy in an unlikely way. She was in midlife and dealing with all the changes that go along with that. Plus, her parents were ill. She realized they would not be there for her forever. When she went home to California on the Christmas holidays with her children and husband, "the inevitable reality of eventual loss" hung over everything. She says "I felt abstracted and disconnect from the Advent season which ordinarily I dearly love. My children had lit the candles of our Advent wreath faithfully each week but I couldn't seem to muster much holiday enthusiasm and I felt guilt ridden about not communicating the delight of the liturgical season to them." (Wendy M. Wright "Two Faces of Joy" Weavings NOV/Dec 93, pp. 19-22)

M: As surprising as this may sound, that is not an uncommon experience at Christmas. Remember last Christmas we had a healing service for "Blue Christmas."

R: Yes, I saw a blue ornament from that service around her just recently. There are many things we do to reconnect with the joy of the season. Wendy tried many things like that. She and her family drove to her hometown where her children

were born and she could attend her old church even with her parents sick. She consoled herself that she was going home. She had fond memories there. She loved her old pastor, remembered his wisdom and earthy humor, kind of like yours! She remembered her midnight Christmas Eve services which were warm and celebratory and child centered. She really wanted her family to have an experience that really focused on the meaning of the Christmas and not on all the things that were absent from their lives. She was really looking forward to that midnight Christmas Eve service.

M: Wendy was definitely focused on the memory of joy. Much like the psalmist remember the celebration of joy when they were free from captivity. How many of us wish we could go to a Christmas Eve service in person, laugh, see the kids acting out the story, singing carols, really enjoy seeing each other? Many of us cannot go home, shouldn't go home, and are really missing that kind of joy.

R: Unfortunately, Wendy's hopes for her Christmas joy were not realized either. When her family arrived in California, they discovered the family service that they used to go to was at a different time, was not child centered, and was terribly crowded with an unfamiliar liturgy. It had all changed. And, their family friend, the pastor was not the officiant.

M: She must have been very disappointed.

R: She was very disappointed. She consoled herself then that at least she was with her family. And the Christmas celebration around the tree with all that excitement did lift her spirits for a while. But it wasn't enough. So she decides to go jogging to get some air. She writes, "I was thudding mindlessly up and down the streets of a nearby condominium complex when the full impact of my weariness hit. I found myself calling up the various arenas of my life that seemed barren and endlessly difficult: parenting, friendships, family relationships, teaching, writing, church community, my own personal interests. Alongside of them I placed my restless, almost unbearable longings for meaning, for fullness, for life. Then very clearly and simply I heard something say, as each of the arenas was called up: "Not this." "Not this." Not this." "Not this."

M: I can hear her footsteps, "Not this. Not this. Not this. Not this."

R: As she ran, she sowed her tears. Nothing she had been given responded to the aching in her heart. She writes, "This was my Christmas gift, I knew, the knowledge that my searing desire was shaped to fit only God. Nothing else would

do. Yet, I had, quite naturally, been trying to find a resting place for an infinite desire in things which were finite.”

M: So often we hope things will make us feel better. “Not this. Not this. Not this. Not this.”

R: She recalls the psalmist, “Your love is better than life itself, my lips will recite your praise; all my life I will bless you, in your name lift up my hands; my soul will feast most richly, only lips a song of joy and in my mouth, praise. On my bed I think of you, I meditate on you all night long, for you have always helped me I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings; my soul clings close to you, your right hand supports me.” (Psalm 63, JB) She had “whispered intuition about the naked God whose true face and name we will never know. No thing.” “Not this.”

M: If “Not this” then what did she find? What changed for her?

R: She saw all the other things around her people, occupations, possessions with new perspective. They were pure gift. And, her understanding of God changed too. God was “Unnamable, unnamed, mysterious. Utterly hidden.” She was “free...of any experienced knowledge of God.”

M: Her perspective really changed.

R: Yes, and that is where she found joy. She says, “Joy arises in the nakedness of not knowing, of not having, of not holding. Joy comes when divinity is found fully in none of the forms you have come to expect it, when none of the earthen vessels wholly encloses divine life. Strangely empty handed, I returned to the house to see with new eyes the beautiful gifts I had been given that could never fully hold the raging and racing of the long I had for God.” (Wendy M. Wright, pp 19-22)

M: Wendy sowed her tears and reaped joy. She captured what the psalmist had longed for – that moment of joy – “Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carry in their sheaves.” (Psalm 126:6)

R: This season is the season of joy. So many questions about joy inevitable come up. Do we long for joy? Do our memoirs and the trappings of our lives fail us? Can we let go of the things that we seek to fill our lives with meaning and face God in our nakedness, with our tears, with our joy?

M: I believe we can have joy this season. But I believe it is not “things” that will bring us joy. The gift we need, the only gift we really need is the gift that God gives us in the manger. Jesus is the gift we need. Jesus has come that we all might have joy and have it fully.

R: Wendy discovered this. Wendy discovered what Mary knew: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . .” (Luke 1:46-48)

M: This Christmas I want to host dinners with my friends, I want parties, and caroling, and eggnog...

**R: But it is not this that brings deep joy, it is God’s presence with us revealed in the manger.**

M: This Christmas I want family gathered from North and South and East and West...

**R: But it is not this that brings deep joy, it is the Christ who came from heaven’s high to earth’s manger-low.**

M: This Christmas I want to walk around the mall without a mask, and go the whole day without washing my hands...

**R: But it is not this that brings deep joy, it is the one who cleanses us from all impatience, all unrighteousness, all sin.**

M: May the tears we sow this season only enrich our trust in the one who makes our joy complete. May we be satisfied with nothing less.

Psalm 126:1-6

<sup>1</sup> When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.

<sup>2</sup> Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

<sup>3</sup> The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.

- 4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,  
like the watercourses in the Negeb.  
5 May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.  
6 Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

Luke 1:46b-55

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