

“Joy in the Lord”

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

May 7th, 2023

Music Sunday

Matt Matthews

The choir program today is called “Joy in the Lord.” I asked Joe if the choir was going to sing, “O Sacred Head, now Wounded.” He said, no. Today is meant to be a choral offering of joy. So, there’s no lament, he said. There are no blues. There’s not one song expressing doubt or woe.

While all those songs are appropriate in worship, in today’s program, they are not. They do not fit the theme. The theme today is: Joy in the Lord. And so,

*Lift up your voice in song.
Let the world sing along.
Bring all the choirs,
bands, and the symphonies,
faithful who all believe
let everything that breathes—
Sing praise to God.*

Praise God, the psalmist says. God has done great things, so, wherever you are, praise God.

Jon Bell of the Iona Community in Scotland, writes these words, which we sometimes use as our call to worship:

Light looked down and saw darkness.

"I will go there," said Light.

Peace looked down and saw war.

"I will go there," said Peace.

Love looked down and saw hatred.

"I will go there," said Love.

So he, The Lord of Light,
the Prince of Peace,
the King of Love,
came down
and crept in beside us.

In Jesus Christ, God has come. Rejoice.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, God is here. Rejoice.

God is eager to eliminate the barriers that separate us from God and from each other. Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice.

Help me sing this Cameroonian folk song: All/Women/Men/All

Sung: He came down that we may have love
He came down that we may have love
He came down that we may have love
Alleluia, forever more.

Let God's people rejoice.

Of course, we can lament and groan, we can be angry and shout out, we can sing songs of impatience, songs of upset, songs crying out for justice. All of these are appropriate, but today we focus on Joy. *Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, Lord of light, God of love.*

How often we forget to celebrate.

We look back on our path, and we see God's hand, and seeing what God has done is worth rejoicing over. Wendell Berry writes,

*We travelers, walking to the sun, can't see
Ahead, but looking back the very light
That blinded us shows us the way we came,
Along which blessings now appear, risen
As if from sightlessness to sight, and we,
By blessing brightly lit, keep going toward
That blessed light that yet to us is dark.*

We have reason to be glad. God's hand is at work in our midst. We have reason to rejoice in the LORD.

- Our Pakistani brothers and sisters have set to us handcrafted rugs. The rug sale ends this afternoon. These fair-trade rugs celebrate the artistry of these craftspeople. Their partnership with Ten Thousand Villages and with us celebrates what God is doing to enrich our community. People from around our region have been coming, visiting with Omer, Emily, and Jim, marveling at these rugs, renewing partnerships, and, yes, buying heirloom rugs. The makers of these rugs are paid a livable wage. Our Pakistan study group went to Sangla Hill and Lahore and met the students we support there. Their families and friends make these rugs. This is not just a rug sale, it's a reunion. It's a celebration of the beloved community God creates to heal the world. **Rejoice!**
- Our very own Ritchie Drennan is driving again after 16-years. A judge has reinstated his license under certain parameters. Yesterday, for the very first time, he drove his wife on a date. Your Session played a small role in this small but sweet victory. **Rejoice!**
- Val Smith, our gifted out-going director of our English Language Learner program, told us about a woman who loves our church. She works on the weekends, so she is unable to join us for worship, but she feels part of a beautiful community, and she's grateful. She's glad. Shouldn't we be glad, too? **Rejoice!**
- Harvey Hodges and Gary Wisemen have been asking their friends—folk like Jan Miller, Dan Harmon, and others—if they'd like to show us their antique cars in an informal car show in a few weeks. (May 21st). Word is getting out, and people are getting excited. This will be a fun celebration, on what we hope will be a sunny May day. **Rejoice!**
- We fed a bunch of junior high DREAAM kids and their staff last Wednesday. The gospel was shared. Food was shared. Prayers were collected and prayed. People were introduced. Friendships began. The seeds of love were planted. **Rejoice!**

Joe, can we sing a sad song today? Can we lament? Can we cry out in anguish? The answer is, "Yes, but not today." Today we praise.

Everyone.

Everywhere.

Let everything that breathes, praise the LORD.

*Clap hands, lift up your voice.
God's people all rejoice.
Praise transcends time:
summer, fall, winter, spring—
hearts pounding, praises bring,
let every living thing—
Sing praise to God.*