

Folks, the service is now up on our Facebook and YouTube pages also. The links are:
<https://www.facebook.com/WestFlamChurch/>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCneF9IOARvh5R30Fzm-1ySA?view_as=subscriber

Joy Discovered in the Oddest Place

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11

December 13, 2020

I thought I should look up the meaning of “joy”, since this is the central theme of Advent 3. The dictionary told me that joy is a “feeling of great pleasure and happiness.” Somehow, I thought it might mean something deeper! Looking up into the sky filled with angels the shepherds heard these words: ***Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.***

So joy is anchored in a baby! Perhaps not in a feeling at all, but found in a relationship secured by a birth, or in theological terms, an incarnation of God. This is how we sing this truth every Christmas:

Christ, by highest heaven adored

Christ, the everlasting Lord

Late in time behold him come

Offspring of the Virgin's womb

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see

Hail the incarnate Deity

Pleased as man with man to dwell

Jesus, our Emmanuel! (Hark the Herald Angels)

In our study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians our group discovered that “joy” a persistent theme of the letter. The word, ***Joy***, occurs 16 times in the letter which is surprising coming from a man imprisoned in a cell and whose life is under serious threat. Where did he find joy in his dark cell? Here is a sample of his confidence in Christ: ***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God,***

which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:4ff)

The Jewish exiles who had returned to Israel from Babylon must have been buoyed by the encouraging message they received from the second book of Isaiah (40-55). It was replete with promises of a brand-new day for them when they returned. God was making a way home for them. Some of the most beautiful language in the bible is found in these chapters of Isaiah 40-66. But it didn't turn out that rosy.

Reality quickly dampened their mood. All we need to do to capture their plight is read the little prophet Haggai. There we read of the devastating situation the exiles faced in Jerusalem: internal dissent and corruption, ravaged by drought, crop failure, hunger, and threatened by enemies that surrounded the territory. This, as you can easily imagine, was a far cry from the light that was to rise on them and end their darkness. No, the darkness hasn't turned to light as was promised; you can easily imagine their disappointment.

Very often our lives can mirror these feelings of disappointment. If Advent is about expectation, preparation and anticipation why are we so often unprepared for it? We focus each week on encouraging symbols: ***hope, peace, joy and love***. Surely, we all want these to be a reality in our lives! Yes, there is a yearning deep within us to be released from our disappointment and discouragement, for the whole world to be freed from injustice. We search, some all their lives, for a quality of life that is rooted in justice and peace. Truth is that we are prone to look in all the wrong places. Society will rarely admit that the path to hope, peace, and joy is the one that takes us through Bethlehem to the lowly cattle shed and a manger where a baby lies.

The prophet's source of joy in our reading, we should notice, is in Yahweh's promise. He says: ***for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.***

The basis of their hope is God's promise of salvation. Similarly, the Psalmist that we read today locates joy in what God has done for Israel: ***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. This is the source of joy for God's people.

I imagine we have all experienced the sheer joy that bubbles up inside us when something we have been anxiously waiting for finally arrives. Or it may be the joy and relief when good news arrives. Inexpressible joy often comes our way through good news. With so much bad news from the media, and so much anxiety fed by what Brian McLaren calls the suicide machine of Western capitalism, joy can be fleeting. Perhaps we should be cultivating joy from an entirely different source than the ones commonly thought to provide it. Perhaps genuine hope, peace and joy are found at the end of a very different rainbow.

But the reality is that joy, like peace and hope, is not a quality that flits on the surface of life's experiences. Society is loud in its claims that happiness is enough and that it can be found by pursuing it within the world; success and prosperity are the keys to our happiness. But happiness is often illusive at best and at worst, superficial. Happiness, like our moods, is changeable, like the weather in Scotland. True joy is deeper and less affected by the shifting tides of our circumstances.

In John's Gospel Jesus says: ***I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:11)***

Paul writes to the Christians in Rome: ***May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Rom 15:13).***

Paul tells us in Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit is: ***love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity... (Gal.5: 22).***

But life sometimes makes it difficult to believe these promises. I remember very well my first December in Canada. I had found my first job at Christies Biscuits on the Lakeshore within a week of

landing in Toronto. The best part of the job, by the way, was being able to eat those delicious Fig Newton's hot off the conveyer belt. I had become a Christian in November and two weeks before Christmas I was laid off. I remember the feeling of despair that engulfed me and the questions it raised about my faith. How could God desert me this way? It really felt like darkness had descended on me that Christmas.

I'm sure many of us have had similar feelings when life took us round a bad corner and the darkness sucked the light and life right out of us. Some of you may be feeling that way today! What do you do with that? You wonder perhaps why God has taken you round that corner when the promises of the bible seemed so clear. You are God's child and Isaiah talks about leading us like lambs and holding us to God's bosom. Is God's promise not reliable?

Traditionally on this third Sunday of Advent the mood changes from one of penitence and fasting to one of joy and celebration. God's deliverance has come; the Word has become flesh and dwelt among us. The colour of this Sunday's candle changes from purple to pink, symbolizing the shift in mood to joy and celebration.

Joy, I am suggesting today, is discovered and nurtured by the good news that God in Christ brings to the world. Jesus' sermon in Nazareth picks up this promise from Isaiah 61 and tells the congregation that it is now truly fulfilled. He quotes Isaiah: ***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18ff)***

Jesus tells his village people that this is found in him. My experience, and that of millions since that promise was given, is that true-genuine joy is found in our relationship with God through faith in Jesus. And if this is our experience of grace, I'm sure we can echo Isaiah's words:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of

***righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a
garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
(Isaiah 61:10)***

Amen