

Joy Comes From Within
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“Joy Comes From Within” Pilgrim Church UCC, December 13, 2015, (Luke 3:7-18) Third Sunday of Advent

It's commonly accepted that people only have six emotions we're capable of feeling. Take a moment to consider how you feel right here, right now. Tired is not an emotion just in case that's your first thought. Psychologists would say that we can feel: happy, sad, surprised, afraid, disgusted, or angry. Hopefully not many of us are angry or disgusted at the moment, but it's fascinating that our range of emotions isn't as expansive as we may assume. When I was doing Clinical Pastoral Education, we had to identify our feelings using only four emotions: glad, sad, bad, or mad. Those were our only choices—and we were expected as chaplains to identify how we felt before and after every interaction with patients. Glad, sad, bad, or mad and ask ourselves why did we feel that way.

If we had to identify John the Baptist's emotional state as we just heard in the Gospel of Luke it would be mad. I don't know about you, but I don't typically call folks “broods of vipers” when I'm feeling glad. John was legitimately mad—people were being terrible to each other and life was difficult enough without people making each other's lives even worse. He's out there in the wilderness telling people to take better care of one other, what's wrong with you people?! If you have two coats, share with someone who doesn't have a coat at all. If you have plenty of food, give some of that food to people who are starving. Tax Collectors, don't cheat people out of their money. Soldiers, don't go around intimidating people to supplement your wages. Basically, stop being mean to each other! Quit exploiting people who already have nothing! John is feisty with good reason.

The irony here is that we encounter John the Baptist yelling at people on the Third Sunday of Advent—when our theme is Joy. Really? Of course there is some joy that John is pointing to Jesus who will come after him. Someone will soon arrive who will teach people how to fully and completely love God and love one another as we love ourselves. Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-Us, and he's going to arrive if we just wait and help prepare the way. John the Baptist pointing to Jesus' advent is joyful.

Though this text still isn't one we would naturally turn to 12 days before Christmas to get really happy. Maybe Luke helps us to see that there's a difference between happiness and joy. Here's how the British magazine *Psychologies* explains the situation: “Joy is more consistent and is cultivated internally. It comes when you make peace with who you are, why you are and how you are, whereas happiness tends to be externally triggered and is based on other people, things, places, thoughts and events.”^[1] We can see that happiness is an emotion based on external factors while joy is more of an internal state of being based on being at peace and loving yourself. Happiness comes and goes depending on what's happening around us. Joy goes deeper and can therefore have more staying power.

It wasn't easy to be happy when John was preaching in the wilderness talking to people about how they needed to stop being mean to each other. People aren't sharing with those in need and they're cheating and intimidating people to take more money from the have nots. What's there to be happy about? Do we honestly blame John the Baptist for being mad? Though he did have some joy—because he knew who he was, why he was there, and how he needed to prepare the way for Jesus.

When we look around our world today it's hard to feel happy. Because there are people, events, and places that break our hearts. Last week in our own congregation there were eleven prayer requests and there are folks who are feeling pretty sad as Christmas approaches. Holidays in general can be bittersweet and trigger memories that are difficult to face in the present. There's a reason why Ebenezer Scrooge encounters the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come in A Christmas Carol. Memories and emotions and time itself can make Christmas beautiful and complicated.

It's during times like these that we can appreciate joy as an internal state of being that's not dependent on other people, things, places, thoughts or events out there. Joy is what we can experience inside ourselves even when there's chaos all around. Joy and gratitude often seem linked.

This week there was a joyful moment in Paris that brought a whole lot of gratitude from folks who've been through so much violence. U2 and the Eagles of Death Metal appeared on stage together less than a month after the deadly shooting at the Bataclan Theater. 90 of the 130 people killed in Paris were killed inside that theater where the Eagles of Death Metal were performing that night. U2 invited the band back to Paris to take the stage with them. Together they sang "People Have the Power." It was an emotional moment for the bands and for the people of Paris. That moment also shows how powerfully music can bring about healing.

Joy is what we can sometimes experience inside even if there's chaos all around us. And to not let the human emotion of fear rule our lives right now is almost becoming an act of defiance. So perhaps we can't look at the world and the difficult moments we face and feel happiness. That's alright and we shouldn't beat ourselves up for that. Maybe instead we can work on experiencing joy by focusing on anything in our lives that we're grateful for.

You know, one of my favorite Christmas hymns that always makes me grateful to sing and hear at church is "Silent Night." Here at Pilgrim Church it's the hymn we use in both Christmas Eve services to light our candles to blaze in hope as we end our time of worship together. It's always been one of my favorites because there's a moving legend behind this famous hymn.

The traditional story is that in Austria in 1818 there was a priest named Joseph Mohr who also happened to be a musician. On Christmas Eve, the church organ broke and there was no way it could be fixed in time for worship. Joseph didn't get disheartened—he was determined that there would still be beautiful music by the time the congregation arrived that evening. He remembered a simple poem he'd written a few years earlier, and thought that if he could find another instrument and a good melody, the congregation could sing the verses of the poem. Joseph asked the church organist, Franz Gruber, to take a look at the poem and see what he could do. Franz was surprised that the poem was really good, and luckily he was used to writing music at short notice. So Franz came up with a soothing lullaby to accompany Joseph's poem. That evening "Stille Nacht" was sung for the very first time in a little village church in Austria accompanied only by a guitar.[2]

My friends, this is what joy looks like. Life's circumstances are sometimes not ideal to say the very least—the organ's out on Christmas Eve (one of the most important days in our Christian tradition when there are lots of folks who attend with all sorts of hopes and expectations.) For any church staff, the organ breaking on Christmas Eve is when we would usually panic. Yet Joseph and Franz didn't let the external situation prevent them from experiencing a joyful Christmas Eve and show that inner joy to others.

"Silent Night" still pierces the darkness two hundred years after that organ broke down in a little village church in Austria. "Silent night, holy night, Child of God, love's pure light" we will soon enough sing in our own darkened sanctuary. We will still sing these words in an imperfect

church with imperfect families and friends beside us in an imperfect world. In truth, we may find ourselves feeling all sorts of emotions in these hectic, complicated days leading up to Christmas Eve. That's to be expected. And hopefully we'll also experience some joy that can only come from within ourselves. May God help us on our way. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] "Joy vs. Happiness," Psychologies, September 2015, <https://www.psychologies.co.uk/joy-vs-happiness>

[2] "Silent Night" Religions, BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/christmas/carols_1....