

Unrestrained Joy

A Sermon for Morning Worship
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Sunday, December 15, 2019 ~ 3rd Sunday of Advent
Text: Isaiah 35:1-7

Joy is the focus of this, the third Sunday of Advent. This is a long-standing tradition in the church and can trace its origins to the Gospel reading associated with this third Sunday of waiting for the birth of the Christ Child. That Gospel reading is from Luke and is known as the Magnificat – the song of praise that Mary sings as she celebrates that she has been chosen to give birth to this miraculous, long awaited Savior. Hers is a song of joy for the favor God has bestowed upon her and a beautiful reminder that God is always on the side of justice and love. This is also why the traditional candle color for this Sunday on the Advent wreath is pink – a visible, tangible reminder of Mary and her unrestrained joy when God steps in and totally disrupts her life.

Not surprisingly then, joy has been on my mind this week. What is joy? How do we understand it? How do we define it for ourselves? So, I'm asking you – how do you understand joy? What does joy mean to you? (*pause for responses and interactions*)

As I said, I have been pondering joy myself this week and one of the insights I've had is that joy relies on an element of spontaneity for joy to be joy, as opposed to say “extreme

happiness.” I think joy kind of sneaks up on you, bubbling up from deep inside as you suddenly find yourself awash in feelings of contentment, happiness and excitement that swirl together in response to some situation or experience external to you. In other words, you can’t plan joy. When you’re planning a happy event – like a wedding or a baptism or an anniversary celebration – you can set the stage for joy in all those preparations, but you can’t schedule it. You can’t demand its presence. Joy happens in those moments or it doesn’t. And sometimes it doesn’t show up when we expect it to. Celebrations which are usually joyful, which we think should be joyful, can still lack the joy we anticipate because something happens which keeps joy away – family infighting, an unexpected tragedy in the midst of the celebration, even our own expectations for perfection – can keep joy from infusing situations where we are looking for it.

Conversely, sometimes joy shows up in situations where we least expect it. For example, I witnessed joy at the Buckler-Johnston Funeral Home yesterday. I didn’t expect it but there it was, working its magic on all the folks gathered to grieve a lovely woman who died too soon and unexpectedly. I’m getting called more and more these days to conduct memorial services for folks who find themselves estranged from any church but still want the words of comfort faith has to offer in times of sadness and loss. Such was the case for the brief memorial service I agreed to

officiate yesterday. As I waited outside the room where folks were gathering, I just listened and that's when I heard it – joy.

Unrestrained joy in the saddest of circumstances. People who came to console the family found themselves consoling each other through stories and memories of this lovely lady. A happy buzz of conversation filled the room. Laughter rang out as joy showed up in the midst of the gathering of all who loved this lady who, from everything I learned about her, made joy and concern for others the centerpiece of her life. The truly amazing part of this, the miracle of this, is that when we were planning the service the family said over and over again that their mom would not want a service that focused on mourning and sadness. They wanted, they needed, a service that would capture the essence of this woman's spirit and that essence was love and joy. They knew that was what she would want. And joy showed up, right on cue. Unrestrained joy chased the sadness of this loss away, replacing it instead with a hope that life would still be sweet for the young couple who lost a mother too soon, that peace would still be real as life moved forward in the midst of loss, that love conquers the sadness and grief of an unexpected death.

Unrestrained joy, dear friends, is what Isaiah is describing in this beautiful text we read this morning. Again addressed to the people languishing after their defeat and captivity, the people needed to know that joy was not gone forever; that it could still

show up surprising them with its miraculous presence when it is least expected. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.” Don’t be discouraged, Isaiah is telling them. Hope is not gone forever. Peace is still possible. Joy will return. And, all this will happen because of God’s undeniable, unrestricted love for you – in spite of all the reasons God has not to love you.

Even the desert will blossom and bloom with joy when you least expect it, Isaiah is explaining to them. And the unsaid words here are, “so be ready.” Be ready to embrace joy and let it fill your soul. Be ready to believe that joy is still possible despite all the reasons there seem to be to keep it away. Be ready to let that joy seep into every pore of your body, chasing away every fear and doubt. Be ready to embrace joy and live it in your own lives each day. Joy, dear friends, is that most wonderful of gifts from our amazing God. We cannot force it to appear. We cannot plan for it and demand its presence. But, neither should we drive joy away by building up walls of worry and doubt, fear and sadness around us. Dear friends, joy needs space in which to operate! Joy needs to know it will find a welcome in your heart when it shows up. Joy expects nothing less than total acceptance when it pops up in your life, otherwise it will quickly dissipate into nothingness. And that, dear ones, is truly a tragedy. When joy shows up and is denied a

welcome, the hole it leaves behind is enormous, sucking up everything into a pit of despair.

So, how do we welcome joy, unrestrained joy, into our lives? How do we make sure that all the cares and worries of life don't inadvertently drive joy away just when we need it so desperately? The young Mary who became Jesus' mother had the best approach to this situation, I think. She had every reason to be terrified at the prospect of an unexplained pregnancy in a culture where women were routinely stoned for such a thing. But instead of giving into her fear and worries, she embraced the miracle the angel offered her. She could have said no, something we always forget. She could have said no, but she didn't. She said yes, a resounding, unequivocal yes and the world changed forever in that moment. That's when joy – unrestrained joy showed up – as Mary sang, “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. ... the Mighty One has done great things for me.”

The Mighty One has done great things for me, Mary's words but true for you too. Dear friends, may the days ahead for you be filled with the unrestrained joy of recognizing all the great things God is always doing for you. Amen.