

# Reconciliation and Joy

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**December 11, 2016**  
**Isaiah 35:1-10 and Matthew 11:2-11**

“Joy to the world,” we will sing more than once in these next few weeks. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come.”

The theologian Daniel Hardy (*The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, page 354) writes that “joy is fundamental to believing as a Christian, to finding God in faith, and to the anticipation of the Kingdom of God. Joy is the sign of each person’s and community’s well-being.” In faith, Hardy writes, “joy denotes a deeper affirmation of God in no matter what circumstances. In favorable circumstances, it appears in exaltation and healing. Where there is vulnerability and sorrow it still appears, but adversity alters its character to self-giving, trust and perseverance...Christian joy is both demanding and attractive,” Hardy writes “grounded in God’s “overflowing truth, goodness and beauty.” It has radical implications for how we live our lives, even in, particularly in, the face of adversity, ours and the world’s.

“Joy to the world,” we will sing. And “joy to you and me.” I am not sure that the culture, or perhaps even the church, gets joy at the moment. It is hard to see it when other things are happening. On one hand signs of division across so many spectrums. On another hand the pursuit of immediate gratification and surface-level contentment that masquerades as joy.

I saw a commercial yesterday that began intriguingly enough: “this year, make the season about joy. This year can be different.” Then the announcer tried to convince me why this particular store was the outlier, why buying Christmas gifts *there* would be qualitatively different than any other store. Perhaps, but it misses the deeper point. Joy is not about happiness, and certainly not about consumption or acquisition.

I mentioned the fabulous movie “Inside Out.” It tells the story of a young girl, Riley, whose world is rocked when the family moves. It imagines her emotions and feelings at a kind of control board. When in balance, good. Out of balance,

not so good. Though there are more than five emotions (psychologists say there are 15 to 20), “Inside Out” focuses on five of them – anger, sadness, fear, disgust...and joy. All are needed. In fact, when Riley’s control board tries to eliminate sadness, things go haywire.

All are needed...”to everything there is a season,” remember. Yet it is joy that drives the ship, and seeks balance with all the others. Joy. The psychologists who worked with the movie’s producers wrote that “Riley’s personality is principally defined by Joy, and this is fitting with what we know scientifically.” (“The Science of ‘Inside Out,’” Dacher Keltner and Paul Ekman, *New York Times*, JULY 3, 2015) Here science and faith go hand-in-hand. Joy – deep contentment, beyond happiness, is fundamental psychologically. And is it a fundamental element of the faith journey.

John the Baptist, our Advent traveling companion, is in prison, and he hears word of what Jesus is doing: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Imagine the deep contentment, the deep joy, of those who are healed. Imagine the deep contentment of John, his joy, in prison, as he hears this good news, good news for which he has been preparing us.

The prophet Isaiah anticipates such joy: “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.” And this: “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

This is not wishful thinking, or pie-in-the-sky. It is a promise and a vision and the gift we anticipate and await. It is faith. It does not mean that bad things will not happen, or that sadness and every other emotion will not come our way – in our hearts and minds and spirits. But God created us for joy, and Jesus came for joy. And when we are not in that joyful place, however that is experienced, we live in hope that joy will come in the morning.

The well-known author C.S. Lewis, in his autobiographical work called *Surprised by Joy*, wrote that “All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be.’”

That seems true to Advent, does it not, the waiting, the preparing, the anticipating. A reminder that true joy is not about pleasure or even happiness, but a deep contentment, a deep understanding that for us – never said casually and said always with great humility of conviction – is only experienced in God, with God, because of God.

Joy will be different for you and for me. But at its heart it will be this deep grounding in God’s love, and grace, and hope. Perhaps our December task is to cultivate it – in the face of our anger and disgust and fear and sadness – to cultivate joy, so that when the baby shows up, our hearts will be prepared, our world will be prepared, and joy will be complete.

In her great poem called “Mindful,” Mary Oliver writes:

“Every Day  
I see or hear  
something  
that more or less  
  
kills me  
with delight,  
that leaves me  
like a needle  
  
in the haystack  
of light.  
It is what I was born for—  
to look, to listen,  
  
to lose myself  
inside this soft world—  
to instruct myself  
over and over  
  
in joy,  
and acclamation.  
Nor am I talking  
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,  
the very extravagant—  
but of the ordinary,  
the common, the very drab

the daily presentations.  
Oh, good scholar,  
I say to myself,  
how can you help

but grow wise  
with such teachings  
as these—  
the untrimmable light

of the world,  
the ocean's shine,  
the prayers that are made  
out of grass?"

Let us instruct ourselves, over and over, in joy. In the face of every form of wilderness and every form of imprisonment, let us practice, simply, what the angels call "Gloria." Amen. <sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The Third Presbyterian Church Choir followed this sermon with an offering of John Rutter's "Gloria"