

Trinity United Methodist Church

December 13, 2020

Pastor Dan Elmore

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (NIV)

1 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, **2** to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, **3** and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. **4** They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

8 “For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them. **9** Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed.” **10** I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. **11** For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

This Sunday we light the third, and pink, candle in our Advent wreath. We'll come back to why it is pink at the end of the sermon. But it is Gaudete Sunday, which is the Latin word for “rejoice,” and we think about “joy” on this third Sunday of Advent.

When I think about “joy” at Christmas time, I think about many of the great Christmas movies that bring us joy. That scene at the end of *Elf* every time as Buddy's

dad finally sings out, and Santa's sleigh is fully powered by Christmas spirit—it gets me right in the feels every time. But it dawned on me that pretty much every great Christmas movie tells the story of a cynic that gets converted to joy. Like John McClane in *Die Hard*. Or like Bob Wallace and Betty Haynes in *White Christmas*. Or Walter, Buddy's dad, in *Elf*. Of course, there is the Grinch. There's Fred, in *Fred Claus*, which is probably my favorite Christmas movie at this point. And of course, maybe the greatest cynic of all, Ebenezer Scrooge.

These are some of my favorite Christmas movies and stories because the cynic in the story speaks to the cynic inside of me. Maybe that's why I have such a visceral reaction to incredibly cheesy, sappy, predictable Hallmark movies. My inner cynic just screams whenever I am subjected to that torture. It should be put in the Geneva Convention. My inner cynic screams, "*Life isn't like that! Life is pain! Life is conflict!*" And yes, there is a teensy little bit of conflict in some Hallmark movies, but life is much more than the conflict of, "Which guy should she marry? The rich, good-looking city guy, or the scruffy-looking hometown boy with the small business he inherited from his grandpa?" Am I right? It might be one of the reasons why *Fred Claus* is one of my favorite Christmas movies now. I highly recommend it.

Spoiler alert, a bit—Fred is Santa's brother. And from childhood, throughout all of life, he builds resentment towards his brother, Nick, who is obviously his parents' favorite son. So it leads to all kinds of fun family dysfunction and dysfunction in Fred's life. But in the end, guess who ends up saving Christmas and being reconciled to his brother and parents? It's Fred. However, the movie closes on a scene where they still have family dysfunction going on. They don't just live happily ever after in joy and eternal peace with each other. They still get on each other's nerves as a family. But the movie ends with them working it out around Christmas dinner.

Now *that* is a feel-good story. That Santa's family can be just as dysfunctional as our own and still, Christmas happens. Right? That is a feel-good story.

Indeed, we might wish that life was like a Hallmark movie. That joy comes from everyone just being all sweet and sappy and overly nice to each other all the time. But how boring would that be? Says the cynic. Indeed, life is *not* like a Hallmark movie. There is great pain and suffering that we experience from time to time, and it is often magnified during the holiday season, especially as we think of loved ones who are no longer with us.

So the temptation to find joy is to seek out joy from earthly and worldly sources. Things like our "stuff." Our money and the things that we can buy with it, both good and bad. Indeed, there is something about Christmas that takes me back to my childhood, when my greatest joy was found in the "stuff" that I got for Christmas. Right? And if you

think about it—I think about it—how much of that “stuff,” soon enough, was shoved in the back corner of a closet, or set up on a shelf to gather dust for who knows how long? Every time we go through the garage my wife wants me to give away my Nintendo Entertainment System. And I say, “No! It’s part of my childhood you’re trying to get rid of, woman!” But it’s in a box. Something that I thought would bring me joy unending.

Where does true joy come from, then? In our lesson from Isaiah, Isaiah speaks of rejoicing. Of having joy in the heart. It comes from almost the end of the book of Isaiah, in which we’ve been spending these last few weeks in this time of Advent. In the book of Isaiah, it starts off with promises and warnings from Isaiah to the people of Israel. He says, “stick to God’s way and God’s plans, and peace and prosperity and safety will be yours, no matter what you’re facing from within or without as a nation and as a people.” However, he warns them if they stray from God’s way, then punishment will be found in God’s judgment that is surely coming.

And Israel, being a bunch of good human beings, of course they strayed from God’s will, and they found themselves in exile. And there Isaiah has prophecies where he basically says, “See? I told you so. But, even still, come back, God says.”

And so in the second half of Isaiah, he takes a shift, and he begins to speak of comfort and words of hope and promise. That even in the impending judgment, God is still calling us back. God is always calling us back to Him with words of promise and comfort, with words of hope that we find in having faith.

Throughout their history, the people of God have indeed suffered much. Talk about pain and conflict, from days of slavery in Egypt to wandering the wilderness to conquering the Promised Land to just being picked on by other, larger nations around them. They had endured much suffering. And one of the questions these prophecies from Isaiah raises for them and for us is, where do we allow our suffering to lead us? Where do we allow our suffering to lead us as individuals and as a people?

So many times the human nature kicks in and we allow suffering to lead us into blaming others. Life isn’t as we think it should be. We are suffering and it’s all someone else’s fault. It’s all *their* fault, whoever *they* happen to be. Especially if we can keep *them* rather faceless.

It’s a popular thing to do today, isn’t it? It seems kind of the American Way these days, and for much of our history as a people here in America. Life isn’t going like we think it should, and it’s all the Democrats’ fault. Or it’s all the Republicans’ fault. Or it’s all *their* fault overseas somewhere, wherever that might be.

Do we allow our suffering to lead us into blaming others? Or might our suffering give us pause to look inward? That’s a really scary thing. Even if it’s suffering that is

thrust upon us, like the death of a loved one or something of that nature, something completely out of our control. But that's usually the suffering that happens less often. More of the time, the suffering that we experience is caused by us, right? We've gotten caught, like speeding down the road. Do we blame the cop for sitting there? The cop shouldn't have been sitting there at that point in time, doggone it! No. One of the lines that I say over and over is that it's horrible when there's no one to be mad at but yourself. And in trying to deflect the blame from yourself, to look at how you might have contributed to any suffering that you might be experiencing, we want to say, "No. It's *their* fault." Right? "If only *they* would understand."

But suffering can give us pause to look inward. Even suffering that is thrust upon us, like the death of a loved one. To see what God might be doing in our lives in the midst of our suffering. I said it way back at the beginning of this pandemic, and as we looked at the wilderness narratives through the Bible. Oftentimes in the wilderness, God has lessons for us to learn, and we're just so focused on getting back to what was, that God forbid we miss those lessons that God would have us to learn in the suffering.

Might our suffering give us pause to look inward and to allow God to mend all the pieces of our broken hearts? And in doing so, as God works within us, God brings joy. Joy that is even born out of suffering.

The psalmist spells it out in the psalm that we read this morning. "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them."

If hope is ultimately found in God who still reigns, in His faithful love through Jesus, which calls us to believe in faith, then true, everlasting and ultimate joy is found in what God does for us and through us, and especially in spite of us. And friends, the good news is that God is nowhere near done with any of us yet.

Isaiah says, "I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God, for he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. And like a bridegroom dressed for his wedding or a bride with her jewels,"—think about the joy of a couple on their wedding day and how that joy might be lifelong-lasting.

Joy can be lifelong-lasting, in the words of Isaiah, as he speaks of joy that isn't just about ourselves, but joy that focuses ourselves outward towards others. This chapter begins with, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," to keep all this joy to myself. Right? No. "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." Joy from the Lord is oriented through us to others, and especially towards those who may never, ever be able to pay us back. The poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners. How well do we do at sharing joy with these groups and others? Again it seems, more often our ways are such that, "Well,

the poor should just pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. The prisoners shouldn't have gotten into trouble to begin with."

But it's not just about being a bunch of do-gooders. It's because the Spirit of the Lord compels us, and the Spirit of the Lord always will lead us in the ways of God's justice for all, of mercy and compassion, of humility and praise.

Indeed, Ebenezer Scrooge could probably be one of the chief cynics of all time and all literature. He thought that happiness and joy was to be found in financial wealth and literally pinching pennies. One of those of, "Ah, help the poor? They should help themselves." So he was shown, on Christmas Eve, how much what he thought was his joy in money was actually leading to suffering of those in his life around him; how causing others to suffer was actually causing himself to suffer and not experience true joy as well. This suffering ultimately led him to repentance on Christmas morning, as the toughest cynic of all was converted by the joy found in the simple meaning of Christmas. The joy found in giving freely, not just of money and "stuff," but joy that is found in freely giving of our very selves and the joy that we experience in Christ. Giving that joy in our hearts toward others.

And so that's why we light the pink, or the rose-colored Advent candle on the third Sunday in Advent. Historically, Advent used to be a very penitential season, not unlike the season of Lent leading up to Easter, when we focus on asking forgiveness for our sins, when we focus on repentance. Let's face it, Lent can be kind of a drag for six weeks, right? Because we want to get happy. We want that joy of Easter. But for true biblical joy to be found, it's found in the suffering, and even in the suffering of Jesus on the cross that ultimately brings life to all of us.

And so, along the way, as Advent traditions developed, some priests decided to change out one of the Advent candles to the rose candle for Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete, the Latin word for "rejoice," from Paul's letter to the Philippians. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! The Lord is near." To say, Hang in there, y'all. Yes, we're still waiting. But we're on the third Sunday out of four, and then we feast.

Even as Advent people, as we live through life waiting for Christ our Lord to return again and make everything right once and for all—we're in the third quarter of four. We're in the seventh out of nine innings. We're almost done. Hang in there. Be joyful. Don't let your hearts grow cynical as we wait, and we pray with the author of Revelation again: *Come quickly. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.* The Lord is near. Let us be glad, with joyful and thankful hearts. Amen.