

# “Those Who Dream.....Sow Joy” — Advent 3

December 11, 2022

Pastor Mark Nelson

“Those Who Dream.....Sow Joy” — December 11, 2022

It’s Advent. And church doesn’t get much more joyful than these last weeks of Advent and Christmas ahead.

And yet, joy isn’t easy. Joy is something that most everyone seems to want. And yet joy; joy can be a tricky thing to define. What is it? Where does it come from? What difference does it make?

Joy has been defined as a feeling of great happiness, contentment. Joy is pleasure. Kate Bowler writes about her son. A couple of years ago, at the first sight of snow, her then six-year-old Zach ran outside screaming—screaming—“*Oh hello snooooow!! Welcome to my life!*” (“*The Season of Waiting...and Waiting...and Waiting, Kate Bowler, 2022*). Snow was magical for him. I don’t know whether Zach screamed the same thing in. Say, *April*. But there it is.

This last week. I listened to a *Ted Talk* by Ingrid Fettel Lee (“*Where Joy Hides and How to Find It,*” *Ingrid Fettel Lee, posted May 2018*). Lee is a designer. She approaches the issue of joy from the standpoint of aesthetics. Lee is determined to try to figure out, as concretely as possible, what things, what shapes, what colors, what experiences, give people joy.

Her research reveals that we humans tend to point to a familiar things when asked, “*What gives you joy?*” And here are some of our most common responses: rainbows, ice cream cones (especially the ones with sprinkles on them), balloons, bubbles, and confetti. Toss a bunch of little colored tissue paper circles in the air and then, says Lee, you get a fairly high return of joy.

“*The same goes for Googly Eyes,*” says Lee. Googly Eyes. Those transparent, imitation eyes used in arts and crafts. The ones with small, free-floating disks inside. These, Lee claims, are really good at stirring up joy. I tried them on my wife. I asked her: “*Did you experience joy?*” Her answer? “*I suppose.*” Not what I was expected!

Some of us are even less enthusiastic. Some of us wish it was just that easy. Because joy is happiness, sort of. Is it really possible that a few flecks of paper or Googly Eyes actually drum up joy?

Every 4 years for the past 50 years, the University of Chicago has surveyed Americans in regard to their overall happiness. At the same time the survey has asked people questions about the things that we often connect to happiness. Questions about personal finance, social relationships, and our perception of the overall health of the country. How's your bank account? How are your friendships? Do you think life will be better or worse for the next generation of Americans?

You'll not be surprised to learn that in the University of Chicago's most recent survey completed in 2020, Americans reported the lowest level of happiness in five decades. Our low level of joy was *not*, however, pegged to personal finance. 80% of those surveyed felt satisfied with their overall financial situation.

According to the survey’s editors, two other numbers best explained our drop in happiness. First, and not surprisingly, feelings of isolation brought on by the pandemic had skyrocketed. We've spent a lot of time alone. Second. A growing number of people of every political persuasion say they are increasingly pessimistic about this country's future. The consensus was we fight too much and accomplish too little. Together these factors have sunk our sense of joy to a 50-year low.

Making this the perfect moment to hear from the prophet, Isaiah. Isaiah’s people were also not feeling the joy. They had endured corrupt and incompetent political leaders. They’d been conquered by enemy armies. They felt like they were wandering in a cultural desert and the only thing on the horizon was a mirage. Many had given up hope. They were resigned to living life without joy.

Isaiah preaches to these ground-down, weighed-down people. And in today's text (Isaiah 12:2-6), he says: “*People! God is our salvation. And you parched souls, you pessimistic friends; you are going*

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached, I prepare them with spoken presentation in mind. So, this written sermon does drift away from proper grammar and punctuation.

## *“Those Who Dream.....Sow Joy” — Advent 3*

2

December 11, 2022

Pastor Mark Nelson

*to feel God's redeeming hand on your shoulder. Trust me. You are going to draw water from the wells of God's salvation. You're going to drink your fill. And when the drops drip down your chins, you're going to say, 'Wow, Isaiah, you were right! And then you're going to sing and dance around. You're going to praise God. You're going to shout with joy.'* See what I mean?

Isaiah was encouraging. Joy will be yours. Those are nice words to hear. But, says a little voice in the back of our head, *“How solid is Isaiah's guarantee?”* I mean nobody wants to offer empty promises to those who are suffering.

A few years ago, I was sitting in my office talking to a member of that church. She was making her way through a box of Kleenex. A week earlier. Her husband had packed his bags and told her that he wanted a divorce. *“My life with him,”* she said, *“has been one big lie. I feel so demeaned. I loved him. I would have done anything for him. And he treated me like a piece of trash. I've lost so much. Memories. Dreams. Even my dignity. Now what? Will I ever be happy again?”*

*“Will I ever be happy again?”* As a pastor, I've heard that question far too many times. I heard it from a friend who lost his son to cancer. I heard it from another after suffering a miscarriage. I heard it from someone who, on her birthday, was fired by a company that she had worked for over 20 years. *“Will I ever be happy again?”*

Isaiah's people asked this question. The prophet listens. He nods. And then he leans forward and makes an outrageous promise: *“God always comes to save. Trust me. Trust me. You will know joy again.”*

What makes Isaiah so optimistic? Now that's actually a trick question. Isaiah's words *are not* optimistic, not at least in the traditional way we think about optimism. Today's reading is not evidence that the prophet has a cheery personality. There's more going on here than, *“Gray skies are gonna' clear up, put on a happy face.”* A lot more.

We tend to forget that joy—true joy, real joy, Christian joy—is weird, unpredictable. It's not something we can *manufacture*. Confetti. Googly eyes. It runs deeper than happiness. It's a *gift*. It's a *response*. To something that happens *to* you.

We learn this every year. You can't turn on joy with a Christmas special. The gift you just had to have last year. Once you got it, how long did that joy last? Minutes? Days? Weeks? Those gifts from years ago, that Salad Shooter, that Chia Pet. Do I still feel real, deep, abiding joy after receiving them? No.

Joy, real joy, is a deeply human response because something has happened. Joy isn't a goal, an achievement. Joy is a by-product, a gracious spinoff. *“Let's all get together and do a little joy.”* No, it's a gift, a response to something that happens to you. You felt it when you were just plodding through your day, minding your own business, and you got some unexpected good news. You felt it when the doctor called to say that the shadow on the X-ray was just that, a shadow and nothing more. Joy. Or when she said, *“Yes,”* and you knew you didn't deserve it. A gift received. Joy.

And that's why Isaiah speaks of joy. Joy is not frivolous optimism. It's a perspective based on the promises of God that allows you to stand strong. To see beyond hard times.

Some of you remember Admiral James Stockdale. Stockdale, as some of you remember, was shot down over Vietnam in 1965. He was the highest-ranking American prisoner of war. Stockdale was held at the infamous Hanoi Hilton for over 8 years. He was tortured 20 times.

Somehow though, he remained strong. Years later, soldiers and sailors held in that same prison would single Stockdale out as a voice who spoke comfort and hope in a world of seemingly unending despair. When asked by journalist Jim Collins, how he dealt so courageously with years of solitary confinement and abuse. Collins spoke of the military's commitment to leave no soldier behind. And then

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached, I prepare them with spoken presentation in mind. So, this written sermon does drift away from proper grammar and punctuation.

## *“Those Who Dream.....Sow Joy” — Advent 3*

3

December 11, 2022

Pastor Mark Nelson

he said, *“I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out but that I would prevail in the end and turn this experience into the defining moment of my life. A moment which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”*

Collins then asked Stockdale. *“Well, who didn't make it out?”* And the Admiral responded. *“The optimists.”* They were the ones who said we're going to be out by Christmas. And Christmas would come and Christmas would go. And then they'd say, *“We're going to be out by Easter.”* And Easter would come and Easter would go. Then Thanksgiving. Then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.

Stockdale went on to say, *“This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end with the discipline necessary to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they may be.”* As strange as it may seem, this recognition is the beginning of joy (*Good to Great*, Jim Collins, 2011).

Swiss theologian Karl Barth describes joy as God's continual defiant *nevertheless*. *Nevertheless*. God is God. In spite of everything. In spite of cancer and crushing bouts of depression, God is still God and God is still good. In spite of everything, God still loves us with abandon. God still dips cups of cold water from wells and hands them to folk walking through life's desert.

God's promises do not hinge on the evening news or the latest report you receive from your doctor. Or whether you feel optimistic or pessimistic when you wake up in the morning, God's promises do not depend on any of those things. Instead, God's promises help us all of those things. Joy is faith's way of saying, no matter what is going on, nevertheless, God is good. *Nevertheless*, God's purposes for me and for you and this whole messy world will win out.

And that is the conviction that grounds Isaiah and that is the challenge that Isaiah delivers to us during Advent. People of faith: we are called to sow joy, to speak God's real promises. Not, *“Gray skies are going to clear up.”* But here, amidst the gray skies, God is present. Here, in the desert, there is water to be had. Here, in this tough hard world. There is reason to resist resignation and gloominess and to pause and to marvel at the goodness of God. *Joyfully*.

So when the woman who was crying in my office said, *“Will I ever be happy again?”* I answered, *“Yes! Absolutely! I don't know how it will happen. I don't know when it will happen. But I believe that it is God's intent.”*

This perspective of faith makes a difference in your life and mine. *“Joy is the oxygen.”* I first heard it in a presentation by Gary Haugen, the founder and CEO of International Justice Mission. It's an organization working to eradicate human trafficking around the world. They do heavy work, rescuing kids from sex trafficking in developing countries.

Gary was asked what his secret was. He has been doing this hard, beautiful work for nearly thirty years. How has he not burnt out? Switched to a lighter job? He said, *“Joy is the oxygen for doing hard work.”*

Now. These last weeks of Advent, with Christmas ahead, I know that there are things in your life that trouble you, that keep you from joy. Still. I hope. I pray. You will be surprised by joy. Yes, joy! In other seasons and on other Sundays, Christians and the church can tend to overdo certain kinds of talk. We talk of *“should,” “ought,”* and *“must.” “Do this; don't do that.”* You come to church feeling pretty good about yourself, about the world. We'll fix that! And you feel worse that before you came.

Following a sermon one time, someone said to me, *“Your sermon was good but rather depressing. You're so critical.”* Someone near him muttered, *“He's a preacher. Of course, he's depressing!”* Church can be that way. But not today! Not these next weeks!

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached, I prepare them with spoken presentation in mind. So, this written sermon does drift away from proper grammar and punctuation.

## *“Those Who Dream.....Sow Joy” — Advent 3*

4

December 11, 2022

Pastor Mark Nelson

Around where I live, by the University, joy is not cool. Don't get too enthusiastic about anything. Moderation. Unrestrained joyful people haven't yet taken a hard look at the world. Pessimism always sounds more intellectual than joy. But not today! Not these next weeks!

Isaiah isn't telling a story about what *we* do against the problems of life. What *we* do to feel joyful. We know *that* story. And it rarely leads to joy, real joy.

Joy—deep, abiding joy—is a byproduct of the story of what *God does*. Isaiah sings joyful praises. Why? *“For God has done gloriously.”* Mary breaks into song? Why? *“For the Mighty One has done great things. For me!”* The words of Isaiah and Mary lift the heart. Their vision for a world and lives made right by God, gives them—and us—joy.

And, in a couple weeks, we'll hear of the shepherds glorifying and praising God, magi coming from the East to give gifts. Simeon praising God in the Temple. Why? Because they have witnessed the amazing, undeserved, and unexpected action of a loving God coming to us! *To us!* People are joyful. Because God has moved and there is a force loose in the world greater than ourselves.

And we'll hear, once again, the words of the angel: *“Don't be afraid. For behold. I bring you news of great joy. (Joy!) For all people. For you is born this day..... a Savior....who is Christ the Lord.....”* Amen.

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached, I prepare them with spoken presentation in mind. So, this written sermon does drift away from proper grammar and punctuation.