

**Sunday, December 14, 2014**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”**

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Today, the third Sunday of Advent we celebrate joy!

Doesn't that make you smile – just the word joy – the very idea of being filled with joy?

Joy is something that comes from the inside.

No one can give you joy – it is something that you must cultivate.

Joy is not to be confused with happiness.

External circumstances can make us happy, even be joyful in nature, but you won't experience them as such unless there is joy in your heart.

Joy is the feeling that you get when you are right with God.

It doesn't mean that you have no problems or that your life is perfect – it means that you know that you are a beloved child of God and that God wants the best for you.

In both of our readings this morning, Isaiah and Luke, the circumstances of the speaker were not great.

Third Isaiah, from which our reading was drawn, addresses the dire situation of the exiles after they've returned to their devastated homeland.

The reality of rebuilding their lives in the wake of their city's destruction feels overwhelming.

The people remember that God has helped them in the past and they cry out for God.

The important lesson here is that the people remember God's relationship with their ancestors and they live in the hope of that same joy.

Isaiah's words, you might remember, are the same ones read by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

Jesus took these words of the ancient prophet and used them to define his work in the world.

He understood that God had called him to a particular purpose which directed and defined his life.

Mary's song of praise also comes amidst circumstances that were less than perfect for her.

Her response to the angel was "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Later when she encounters Elizabeth she proclaims

"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."

She feels blessed, honored, to be chosen to serve God.

She embraces her call and lives in hope.

She is joyful.

Reverend Wes Avram captures this beautifully:

"Mary's song marks a transformation from seeing her condition's weight to receiving a new power within the situation, to recognizing that the giver is the actual gift. She is less an object of uncertainty and more a receiver of an empowering spirit. And then, finally, she is a participant in the work of that very spirit –God's spirit. Her life becomes part of a larger drama in which she both loses and finds herself. It is God's drama, and it's Mary's blessing."

The giver is the gift.

God's gift to us is joy.

I particularly love these passages from Isaiah and Luke because they give us hope for transformation.

There is no better example of the transforming power of God's love than the change in Mary from a lowly young woman to one who is called blessed for generations.

Mary's trust in God gives us hope for our own transformation.

What if you started each day reciting those few lines from scripture that we just heard?

What if you went through your day repeating to yourself

*"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior."*

Do you think it would make a difference?

I do.

I think that when you go through your day with your heart full of love and a sense that you are blessed, your anxiety is reduced, your stress is lowered, you are calmer, you are transformed.

Advent gives us the opportunity to get ready to welcome Jesus into our lives.

It is good that we are given this time, because once we let Jesus in, there is no turning back.

Once our hearts rejoice with love it is hard to return to a life of cynicism and judgment.

Once you count yourself among the blessed, you will see other people in that light as well.

Mary's song and Isaiah's declaration are beautiful.

But there is a challenge in their poetry.

Their joy cries out to us to have courage, that we also might be brave enough to be vulnerable to God's transforming grace.

Our hearts must be open.

We sing 'Joy to the world – the Lord is come – let earth receive her King;

Let every heart prepare him room'

This is the attitude that we must strive for during Advent.

We must work to prepare our hearts to receive God's blessing.

During this season of preparation we remember that it's not just the birth of a Child that is important here, but the birth of a whole new order of love and justice which this Child brings into our world.

The inspiration and challenge of the Christmas story is that God's new order is among us.

We are no longer waiting for God's Reign to arrive.

We can participate in it now if are willing to receive the courage and the imagination and the faith.

Both Isaiah and Mary characterize the new world being brought forth as a distinct, radical change of the existing order.

Isaiah promises garland instead of ashes,

Gladness instead of mourning, praise instead of faint spirit.

Mary sings of the proud being brought down from their thrones while the lowly are lifted;

The hungry are filled with good things.

In this new world – the world of hope, peace, joy and love, all are welcome.

This is the world that we usher in at Christmas.

By choosing to celebrate Christmas – the symbolic birth of the Christ child – you are committing yourself to being a part of this new, joyful world order.

With that commitment comes a responsibility to embrace a life centered on God.

We are asked for nothing short of adoration for the giver of immortal gladness –the savior who fills us with the light of day.

These descriptive phrases are drawn from the hymn we will sing together in a few minutes.

In 1786 German poet Friedrich Schiller wrote a poem called *Ode to Joy*.

In 1793, at the age of 23 Beethoven noted in a letter that he was contemplating putting *Ode to Joy* to music.

Thirty years later he finally found the right music for the poem with his ninth symphony.

One hundred years later in 1907, Henry van Dyke adapted the lyrics that are familiar to us today.

As you sing, I want you to pay careful attention to the words.

I want you to let the message of the hymn find its way into your heart so that throughout the Christmas season you keep repeating to yourself: Joyful, joyful we adore thee, God of glory, god of love.