

Sermon for Dec. 15, 2019, Advent 3  
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church  
Isa. 11: 1-10; Matt 1:18-25  
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

*Take up a room, Christ Jesus, in these words and in our hearts. Amen.*

### God With Us

On this third Sunday of Advent, the joyful Sunday, I am reminded that as Presbyterians we are taught that the chief end of man is what? "To glorify God and to enjoy him forever!" Our purpose on this earth is two-fold: first, we praise God, and secondly, we enJOY God! We were created for JOY, joy in God, joy in each other, and even, yes!, joy in ourselves! What an amazing concept! But when I look around at us, at our community, our country, our planet, everything often appears so joy-less, like the weight of the world has taken permanent residence on our shoulders. Have we forgotten, or neglected, our God-given essence? Have we forgotten just how much we are loved? Just because?

In a book entitled The Art of Christian Listening, Thomas Hart explains the love Christ has for us. Listen for yourself in these words:

*It is as if Jesus surveyed the religious scene of his day and said to himself: "These are all good people (that would be us)-- but they are all confused. They think God wants religious services, tithes, and the strict observance of law. In fact, God wants their hearts. They think he wants religiosity, complete with sackcloth and a daily regimen. God would much rather see them love one another and share what they have with another, so that everyone has life. They think God wants them to live in fear, fear of doing wrong and fear of him, when in fact God wants them to live in joy and freedom. They think he wants them to walk about with their heads down because of all their failures, when in fact God wants them to trust like children in his forgiveness and the dependability of his love. They think they have to earn their way with him and win a reward if they can, when in fact God wants them to accept his acceptance of them as a gift quite undeserved." We are given the opportunity, time and again, to accept Christ's acceptance of us, which can only lead to joy, no matter what.*

We are made to glorify God and to enJOY him forever! Right now. This moment. But we aren't always joyful, are we, even though Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always!" (Phil. 4:4). Pharisees surround us, like they did Jesus, wanting to take our joy, our assurance, our acceptance, away--whether they are people who envy our joy or who don't want to hear our praise or who are life-drainers, always complaining, never satisfied. And, as we all know too well, bad things do happen that challenge our sense of joy. "Life

is difficult," Scott Peck stated in the opening sentence of his book The Road Less Traveled.

And it is. Dreams die. Our well-laid plans fall apart. Certain expectations are never met. People we've known for a lifetime begin to forget who we are. Test results come back with news we don't want to hear. We lose a job or our direction. Our children make poor choices. We make poor choices. The phone really does ring in the middle of the night with a policeman on the other end. Investments made in relationships don't pay off. And we lose those people we love most. Sorrow is the price we pay for having experienced joy, and sorrow hurts.

Certainly, Jesus Christ knew that truth better than any of us. He felt deep joy in, and love for, those around him, while he also experienced the bitterness of sorrow. He waited while the people who cheered him on joyfully, proclaiming "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" became the very ones who days later shouted "Crucify him!" And so Jesus spoke a deep truth: "I tell you, you will weep and mourn; you will have pain, but your pain **will** turn into joy" (Jn. 16:20). Not *might* or *could* turn into joy, but a promise that our pain **WILL** turn into joy.

And so faith becomes entwined with joy. On our faith journeys, we sometimes doubt. We sometimes question. We have moments of strong faith--certain belief--and times when we wonder where God is, and even if God is.

So it is with joy. We think we've lost it, somehow. We don't feel it. We try to find it, as if it's something *out there*. We get joy and happiness confused. Happiness is a fleeting feeling, dependent on many different variables. It comes and goes. As much as I love chocolate covered cherries, and I'm happy eating them, they won't bring me joy. Joy is something much deeper; it is *an awareness* of security, of peace. It can be boisterous, or it can be very quiet, still, like the three does that crossed the road in the misty morning fog on my way here last Wednesday. A Trinity of does. Spiritual joy gives us strength instead of taking it away. When attended to, it grows instead of fades. And spiritual joy, as opposed to happiness, can even co-exist with pain. It must, or we could never survive this world.

So, then, what is this spiritual joy? It is believing that no matter how dark or uncertain or trying our days are, Jesus is Emmanuel (God-with-us). Emmanuel is more than a name for Jesus; Emmanuel is an act of love. Emmanuel is the one who left the glory of the heavens to come down into our darkness, leaving freedom behind and taking on obedience and powerlessness. Emmanuel left the bliss of life with the father to be in the midst of illness, sorrow, persecution, betrayal, and misunderstanding. Behind Emmanuel was all his magnificence while before him was death on a cross between two criminals. For what purpose? To be our source of joy because Emmanuel knows that life is difficult

because Emmanuel lived it. Emmanuel was, and is, God-with-us, right now, wherever we find ourselves, and Emmanuel is waiting for us in the future, wherever it leads.

We are made to glorify God and to enJOY him forever! But Pharisees don't want to hear joyful praise from us: "Teacher, order your disciples to stop," they demanded in Luke 19:39. Our culture, our society, sometimes our friends and family, even our own hang-ups, order us to stop being joyful. Those voices belong to Pharisees, those people who have never experienced real joy and so don't understand how we can be joyful. Those voices belong to old records, false teachings, old traditions that dictate how we are supposed to live according to others and so keep us from being the joyful children of God we were created to be. In response to those voices, we can choose to accept God's acceptance of us with joyful gratitude.

Order us, Christ's disciples, not to shout with praise? Order us, Christ's disciples, not to enjoy him? Order us, Christ's disciples, to forget that joy is our essence? We are *promised* joy. "I bring you tidings of great joy," proclaims that angel at Christ's birth, and in Jesus' last words to his disciples, he says, "I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (Jn 15:22). Even if we quit praising Christ, the rocks would shout out! A multitude of heavenly hosts would call out, "Glory to God on the highest!" And, heaven and nature would sing.

But God made us greater than rocks and gave us dominion over nature. God made us in his likeness: "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy!" (Ps. 126:2). The joyful news this third Sunday of Advent is that for unto you a Savior has been born who wants to come into your darkness and set you free! Who wants to take your broken heart and make it whole! Who knows your personal pain and your wounds and desires to heal them! Who, for love of you, opposed the Pharisees who would prevent your joy. Who, for love of you, accepts you as you are. Who, for love of you, allowed himself to be made in your image so that you would see who God truly is: love.

In these brief last days of Advent, as we approach the manger, let our mouths be filled with laughter and let's shout out for joy! Let us be as intentional about being with God as God is about being with us. Emmanuel is coming--God-with-us.

He has started on his journey toward us and nothing will stop him from coming and abiding with us, nothing, until the end of time.