

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's the third Sunday of Advent. Our journey continues. We're not there yet, but we're getting closer. The theme this week is Joy... the joyous anticipation of Christ's coming as God in the flesh to be Emmanuel, God with us. The visual representation of Joy is found in the rose candle on the Advent wreath that we lit this morning. But the joy is couched in our lessons this morning with a tinge of doubt.

In the semantics of the church, doubt has been a negative word. It is rarely used in a favorable way. Faith, not doubt, is the great word of the church. As I stand here every Sunday morning and look into your up-lifted faces, you look so proper, so content, so believing. You seem to be so certain, so full of faith, and so free of doubt.

But, I have a suspicion that the way you look is not the way you are. Beneath the skins of many of you there is planted the seed of honest doubt. Perhaps you don't share these feelings with anyone; but your doubts are there, and they are real. Your worship doesn't express your doubts, uncertainties, and skepticism. In facing this situation, all of us at times cry out with the man in the Gospel, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief." This capacity to doubt can often lead to some of life's most profound questions.

Such was the case with John the Baptizer. His question — "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" — grew not out of his uncertainty, but out of his doubt. John the Baptizer had heard about the words

and deeds of Jesus, but what he had heard did not square with his expectation of the Messiah.

After all, Jesus was born not to royalty, but to a peasant woman. He functioned not as a military ruler, but as a servant. He came not as a judge, but as a forgiving redeemer. He did not bring heavenly condemnation; he brought divine love. He did not associate with the religious establishment, but he went from village to village associating with the rubbish heap of humanity. He spent his time and energy with the least and the lost. He was most concerned with the powerless: the blind and the lame, the lepers and the deaf, and the poor and the out-cast. And Jesus dared to teach that the weak occupied the most important place in the Kingdom of God.

John the Baptizer became confused about the way in which Jesus acted out his messiahship. He had doubts about the validity of his contemporary, Jesus of Nazareth. His skepticism caused him to send one of his buddies to Jesus with the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Like others in the New Testament, John the Baptizer was not positive. Oh, to be sure, there were fleeting moments of recognition. Mary thought Jesus was a gardener. Those on the road to Emmaus never did recognize him. Even his closest disciples were not certain if he was or was not the true Messiah.

That John the Baptizer had doubts about the messiahship of Jesus is revealed in his question: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" His question is not clear, either in what is being asked or why. But like all good questions, it shoves the reader into deeper regions of thought.¹

Jesus' reply to John's disciples, John's family of followers, was gentle and understanding. "Go back and tell John what you have seen. Tell him that the

¹ A sermon illustration for Advent 3A by Joe Pennel. Accessed on 12/14/19 at sermons.com

blind see, the lame are walking, the lepers skin is clear, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

There is joy in the healing and the act of Jesus demonstrating how God is making things right in the world. Joy that hopefully, John felt as he sat in that prison cell. He had confidently preached about the coming of the Messiah and he had baptized and called for repentance in preparation for that coming. And in doing so he stepped on toes. He stepped on the toes of the rich and the powerful, he called out king Herod for his act of adultery. And like any tin-horn authoritarian dictator wanna be, Herod slapped him down, threw him in prison, into a setting that John probably realized was a death sentence. I wonder if the eyewitness accounts of John’s friends brought joy to John when he saw them next? Did they give him a glimpse of the coming kingdom of God that Isaiah describes so well?

Remember last week how I described Isaiah as a storyteller? His prophecies that describe the coming kingdom of God are filled to the brim with images that spark our imaginations. They fill us with images of peace, hope, and joy and call us to trust in the ever present love of God that is the reason why this incarnation happened in the first place.

Our text from Isaiah drips with joy. In a desert culture, images of flowing water and lush greenery are signs of good fortune, of blessing and prosperity, and, of course, of joy. But Isaiah goes overboard, turning the desert into a swamp and the hardy desert grasses into reeds and rushes – river plants. There are pools and springs; it almost overwhelms.

Isaiah also gives us some insight into the nature of joy. Joy is communal; joy is shared and sharable. It helps us reach out and gather up others, particularly those who aren’t yet experiencing the joy. “Strengthen the weak

hands” is a statement designed to help us be with others. It isn’t “strengthen your own weak hands,” but strengthen the hands of others. And it is an imperative in the Hebrew – get out there and strengthen!

Notice, too, that the healing comes from the sharing of the joy. Wholeness comes from the invitation, the reaching out. Isaiah doesn’t say, “Go and heal”; he says, “go and build up, and then healing will happen.” And together, we will all become pilgrims on the way. And no one, not even us fools, can lose our way when we travel together in joy. ²

We saw some bits of joy yesterday here at the church as we hosted our annual Free Store Christmas Extravaganza. You could hear joy in the voices of the children as they were able to meet with Santa and pick out a gift for a parent or loved one. You could hear joy in the voices of the parents as they shopped for their families. You could even feel the joy in the nearly 40 people from the congregation who volunteered to help in one way or another. Thank you to all of you for what you were able to accomplish yesterday as we served nearly 200 folks breakfast (and there were folks who chose not to eat) while over 70 families were served in a way that shared Christmas joy with others.

There was even joy evident in the setting up of the poinsettia tree... joy that impressed the gentleman from Ensign florist who delivered the poinsettias yesterday afternoon.

Our challenge in this season is to not let the joy stealers steal our joy away from us. Yes, as we look around our world, there are plenty of things that are waiting just like a Venus flytrap to catch us and suck the life and joy right out of us. But we have something that the joy stealers don’t have... and that is Jesus.

² Sermon notes from the umcdiscipleship.org series “Are We There Yet?”

Messiah. Emmanuel. God with us. Jesus brings God's gracious gift of joy into our hearts so that we can share that joy with others.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that for some folks, joy is hard to find in this season because of the loss of a loved one or some tragedy that may have happened in your life that shook you to your very core. In these situations, the grief is palpable and the depression is real. And there is nothing that I can or will say that can take the pain away. If you find yourself in that situation this year, know that you're not alone. Know that you have people walking along side you that may not know your grief, but they have been there, faced their own grief, and figured out how to deal with the new normal in their life. They are willing to listen and provide a helping hand to help you get back on track. But never forget you are not alone... that God is with you... never leaves your side, even if you don't feel it.

The joy comes in knowing that God cares enough to have lived among us, to have felt our joy and our pain so that, in the end, we would be made whole again. And so, with God's joy in our hearts we can join with others who have sung this song in the 300 years (this year) since its composition:

Joy to the world... the Lord is come.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.