

We began Advent with hope as the story of Daniel reminded us that even when we face what feels like lions, we can still believe that God offers us new possibilities. And then last week the prophet Joel encouraged us to believe in love, even when life becomes difficult. But this week we're to think about joy? Really? Joy in a pandemic? Joy in quarantine?

Somebody, who I think was trying to be helpful, warned me that many coronavirus survivors experience depression during the final stages of recovery from COVID-19. I began to wonder after hearing this comment, "How in the world will I come up with words of joy as I near the final stages of healing from this virus if it sends me into a pit of depression?" This could be a really short sermon.

I think part of the problem with understanding joy is that we equate it with happiness, but they are not the same. One can be unhappy with a situation and still experience joy, which is a deep sense of connection to God and one another. Happiness focuses on what I want in the moment, while joy senses the bigger picture of what God is doing in

the world, as in the song, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come."

Author Andrew Solomon noted that "The opposite of depression is not happiness, but vitality," and even while battling depression, he wrote, "I have discovered what I would have to call a soul, a part of myself I could never have imagined until one day...when hell came to pay me a surprise visit. It's a precious discovery."¹

This writer seems to suggest that through his struggle with depression, he found a deeper connection with himself and with God. It's often through our struggles that we experience a deepening in our relationship with God. From that encounter, a sense of joy begins to emerge, a trust that in life's chaos God will get us through it.

I think the prophet Isaiah understood this idea of joy in the midst of suffering as he spoke to his fellow exiles, to his friends and citizens living in a strange land after forcibly removed from their homes. As he looked around, he saw the brokenhearted, those in mourning, those captured in a system that viewed them more as the spoils of war than as people with feelings and dreams.

As his heart ached, he said, “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” (61:1). The Hebrew word **מָשַׁח** **maw-shakh**, translated as “anointed,” means to pour out or smear on oil. Thousands of years ago, when someone was chosen by God for a certain task, anointing with oil served as a sign of this invitation. It’s the same word from which we get the term *Messiah*, which Christians use to describe Jesus as God’s chosen One.

When Jesus made an appearance as an adult in the temple in his hometown, the gospel Luke tells us he read this same scripture from Isaiah, identifying himself as one chosen by God to bring good news to the oppressed.

As Isaiah offered his vision of a better time, he even envisioned a time of joy as he wrote,

I surely rejoice in the LORD;
 my heart is joyful because of my God,
 because he has clothed me
 with clothes of victory,
 wrapped me in a robe of righteousness
 like a bridegroom in a priestly crown,
 and like a bride adorned in jewelry.

Even though the prophet and his people were still in captivity, Isaiah imagined himself all dressed up in celebration clothing, rejoicing that the oppression has ended. He knew that hard work would still be required, that the struggle was not over, but he recognized that it’s through the struggle that joy emerges, which is what Disciples preacher Fred Craddock discovered as he talked to a group of youth who had just returned from a mission trip:

I recall some years ago in a church I was visiting on a Sunday afternoon, a van pulled up in the church parking lot, and a bunch of young people got out. They looked like thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, maybe up to eighteen years old. I think there were ten or twelve young people who belonged to that church. They got out with bedrolls. It was the awfulest looking bunch of kids you’ve ever seen, something like the cats would drag in. They were really in bad shape. I said, “What is this?”

They had just returned from a work mission. They named the place where they went. In one week, those young people, along with other young people, had built a little church for a community. They were beat. Aw, they looked terrible.

They were sitting on their bags out there waiting for their parents to come. I said to one of the boys, I said, “You tired?”

And he said, “Whew—am I tired!”

Then he said, “This is the best tired I've ever felt.”

Now that's what joy is. Do you feel that? “This is the best tired I've ever felt.” I hope someday young people in this church get that tired. I hope we all get that tired. The best tired there is, is called in your Bible, joy.²

One author noted that “Joy...is at least grounded in the idea that something is good for someone else. We have joy when—even in our suffering—we are acting toward someone else's well-being.”³ That's what this group of youth discovered, that in getting tired helping someone else, they experienced joy.

During this Advent season we may feel exhausted from all the things we have to balance—wearing masks while keeping connected to our loved ones; staying away from gatherings at church while longing to continuing worshiping with others;

¹ Andrew Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/dark-night-of-the-soul.

² Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves; Richard F. Ward. *Craddock Stories* (Kindle Locations 1357-1364). Kindle Edition.

wanting to maintain family traditions while practicing social distancing. It's tiring, isn't it? It's hard work. And yet, as we reach out to one another, God's joy moves among us.

As an anonymous poet wrote on the wall during the Holocaust:

I believe in the sun
even when it is not shining
And I believe in love,
even when there's no one there.
And I believe in God,
even when he is silent.

I believe through any trial,
there is always a way
But sometimes in this suffering
and hopeless despair
My heart cries for shelter,
to know someone's there
But a voice rises within me, saying hold on
my child, I'll give you strength,
I'll give you hope. Just stay a little while.

May you continue to believe in joy, even when the sun is not shining.

³ Christopher Benek, “God can be found in difference between happiness and joy,” 10/7/14, www.islandpacket.com/living/religion/article33609807.html