



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 3

Peace, Justice, Joy, and Salvation: An Adult Advent Study

The Gift of Joy: The Desert Shall Rejoice and Blossom

Introduction

Once again, it is that time of year when people ask each other: “So, are you ready for Christmas?” This often means: Have you bought all your gifts yet? I know some people manage to have all their shopping done by Thanksgiving. Many are still doubtless headed to the stores (real and virtual). Some of us, overwhelmed for a variety of reasons, have done next to nothing and are at the front edge of panic. This Advent, we are reflecting on readings from Isaiah through the lens of gifts—not the gifts we are looking to give but the gifts that God desires to give to us. The first two gifts we considered were peace and justice. Both of these gifts involve our relationships with one another. God’s deep desire is that we should live in harmony with ourselves and with one another; we should be at peace and be peacemakers. God’s other desire is that we recognize that the precondition of harmony is respect; we should treat one another fairly. Today, we consider the gift of joy—which is the experience we have when our relationships with God, one another, and ourselves are shaped by God’s vision for human flourishing.

Focus Text: Isaiah 35:1–10

Isaiah announces the theme in the opening verses: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing” (35:1). When the Bible speaks of wilderness, the picture we should have in our minds is not a dense forest but rather a barren desert. This is a place where water is scarce and little or nothing grows. Israel itself is a relatively verdant stretch of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. On the far side of the river and to the south, the land is desert wilderness. But even in such barren landscapes, wildflower seeds often lie dormant. If even a little rain falls at just the right time, the seeds will germinate when the sun shines. Then suddenly, you get up one morning to a completely transformed world. Where there was only a barren landscape, there is now a carpet of color as far as the eye can see. It won’t last long because the sun is hot and the soil is sandy, but once you have seen this, you will never forget it. This, in Isaiah’s imagination, is what joy looks like. This is what it means to rejoice.

Many scholars read this chapter as the work of the historical prophet Isaiah, who lived in the eighth century BCE. During this time, the southern kingdom of Judah was being pressured to join the northern kingdom of Israel and neighboring Syria in a rebellion against the mighty Assyrian empire. But because verses 8–10 describe how the “ransomed of the LORD” will return to Jerusalem, others argue that this chapter dates from the time of the exile when a later prophet was calling people to hope in God’s promise of redemption. In either case, the situation into which the prophet speaks is one of grave danger and intense suffering. Regardless of the historical setting, the prophet urges the people to take the very long view. Lift your eyes and look beyond the present. There is a future, the prophet says. It is God’s future, which is full of life. God’s promises can always be trusted; therefore, God’s people can rejoice even when outward circumstances suggest otherwise.

Rejoice: Other Voices

During the season of Advent, the church often reads or sings the song of Mary (Luke 1:46b–55), or the “Magnificat” (the first word, “magnify,” of this text in Latin is often used as its title). “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (vv. 46–47). The song is an outpouring of great joy. In the first century of the Common Era, centuries after Isaiah wrote, Jews lived under a brutal occupation by the Roman Empire. A puppet king in Jerusalem had some powers, but everyone knew Rome was really in charge and that any rebellion would be met with swift retaliation. Isaiah envisions the desert in bloom, but Mary sings of the mighty being cast down from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. In her song, the entire social order is upended: the hungry are filled but the rich are sent away empty (because they don’t need anything more!). Her words are not exactly metaphorical. She envisions a reversal of oppression and injustice and the dawning of a new age.

There is something odd about this song, however. Most of the verbs are in the past tense. It’s as though all of this *has already happened*. The Greek verbs are ever so slightly nuanced, however. This kind of past tense means that something that has happened is also happening in the present and endures into the future. This

is God’s eternal plan and purpose, and therefore, it can be trusted to be true. The pain of the present is not the future that God wills. Our current division and discord is not the world God intends. The world that Mary envisions has already come to pass in God’s time. So rejoice!

Joy, like gratitude, stems from seeing the world through the lens of God’s steadfast or covenant love.

Another text that is often read during Advent is Philippians 4:4–7: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.” This exhortation comes near the end of Paul’s letter to his friends in Philippi. In fact, his entire letter is suffused with joy: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you” (1:3). But once again, context matters. Paul is writing this letter from prison. This time, his incarceration will not lead to execution, but he does not know that. As he writes this letter, he is in grave danger, and yet his theme is joy. In fact, he suggests that rejoicing is far deeper than an emotion. It is rather a kind of spiritual discipline or practice. Joy, like gratitude, stems from seeing the world through the lens of God’s steadfast or covenant love.

What these three readings have in common is joy that is the result of looking at the world from the vantage point of God’s promised redemption. God is coming to vindicate God’s people and to redeem them from bondage. God is at work to undo injustice in the world and turn over the structures of power in which the strong oppress the weak. God is the power of life that triumphs over death. Those who can reframe their experience through the lens of God’s work in the world are able to rejoice.

As these (and most of the rest of the Scriptures) make clear, this has never been easy. Most of the greatest expressions of God’s promises have been made in the midst of dark and dangerous times. Some dismiss this as “pie in the sky,” a willful denial of hard realities. Others are able to see that these witnesses who have gone before us received gifts from God that enabled them to have hope despite the realities of persecution,

injustice, and death. Trusting in the promises of God has never been easy, but those who do have found in those promises both the inspiration and the courage to resist evil and transform the world. When we can trust that God is at work in the world through us to bring about God's designs and desires for human flourishing, we discover power to pray and work and rejoice.

Gaudete: What Does It Mean to Rejoice?

The traditional name of the Third Sunday of Advent is "gaudete," which means rejoice. In these passages, joy is what people experience as they envision what God desires and intends for human beings. Many theolo-

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gians today use the language of "human flourishing" to describe what life would be like if we lived according to God's ways. Violence and warfare would end. Everyone would have enough to eat and adequate shelter and clothing. We would not be afraid—of God, of one another, or even of death. God wants human life to flourish, and when we do, we rejoice. Obviously, we have yet to realize God's vision, either individually or collectively. But when we catch a glimpse of the divine vision being lived out in our world, we sing out loud and clap our hands and jump up and down and smile.

The gift of joy is complicated, though. How do we receive this gift when our life circumstances have not changed? When we struggle with broken hearts and hurting bodies, where is the joy? If we are overcome by the anger and meanness of our political life, what is there to rejoice over? When injustice and poverty and racism continue to tear apart our society and destroy

people's lives, where is the joy? If we are far from flourishing, how are these ancient words not just another chirpy greeting card?

Here is a more complex question: How does someone give someone else joy? What does it mean to receive joy as a gift? If we think that joy simply means "happiness," this is probably impossible. If we think of joy as an emotion, a kind of euphoria, then it is all too likely to be dashed against the rocks of reality. But this kind of joy and rejoicing does not depend on how I feel, but on what God has promised. Joy is ultimately about recognizing and experiencing God's presence in your life, a presence that then puts everything in a different perspective. Joy is trusting in the goodness of God in spite

of the meanness of the present age. To rejoice is to express confidence in the trustworthiness of God in spite of pain because God meets us in the places where we are most broken. To rejoice is above all to sing, to lift our voices and experience the mystery of beauty manifested in music that stands over against everything that is ugly and bitter and cynical.

Frederick Buechner wrote that "joy is home. . . . God created us in joy and for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy, because whatever else it means to say that God created us in [the divine] image, I think it means that even when we cannot believe in [God], even when we feel most spiritually bankrupt, [God's] mark is deep within us."¹ God's joy is in our DNA. And so we can rejoice!

Note

1. See Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 280.

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