

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

3-Narrative 15 – Advent 3 - Joy  
Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13 (Luke 2:25-32)

15 December 2019  
Salem, Bridgeport

“Finding Joy”

Their city had been besieged, captured, and destroyed, their temple torn down,  
their homes leveled, their possessions plundered,  
and they had been carted off into exile, to live as poor refugees in a foreign land.  
Now at long last they had been allowed to return home, but home was not the way it had been.  
Loved ones had been killed or had died, and they would have to start all over to rebuild their lives.  
As they watched the foundation of a new temple being laid,  
they couldn't help but think of everything and everyone that they had lost,  
how they could never go back to the way things had been,  
how things were forever changed,  
and they were overcome by grief and sadness.  
Tears streamed down their faces and they wailed aloud.  
And yet, in the midst of their grief, they found joy.

About a year and a half ago I found myself searching for joy.  
I had everything a person could possibly want –  
good health, a husband, children who had good jobs and good relationships,  
a house, a car, a job I loved, and money to pay the bills.  
I had all of those things but I felt awful. I was completely devoid of joy.  
And so I prayed for it and as I prayed I went to the doctor, who thought it was depression.  
After all, my mother had suffered from it, both my sisters suffer from it,  
and I've been on a low dose of antidepressant medication for most of my adult life.  
The doctor tried upping the dosage, tried different medications, tried different combinations,  
but although I felt a little better, I knew I was still missing something.

I continued to pray & at some point I realized that there was a person I knew whose life was kind of the opposite of mine.  
His wife had had cancer and had lost her job, and when he had had to miss work to care for her, he had lost his.  
They were having trouble paying the mortgage and both their cars had broken down.  
While she had overcome the cancer, now he was ill.  
Unlike my life, his life was a total mess, and unlike my heart, his was filled with joy.  
I wanted what he had.  
When I asked him about it he told me that it was the fruit of the Spirit.  
So over the course of the past year I made it my mission to learn about the Spirit and its incredible fruits.

In Galatians, chapter 5, Paul lists nine fruits of the Spirit,  
and, interestingly, the first 3 listed are those on which we focus the last 3 Sundays of Advent – peace, joy and love.  
So with today's reading about Israel's joy in the midst of grief, and today's lighting of the candle of joy,  
I want to talk about what joy is and how to find it.

The first thing we need to remember is that God created us as physical beings  
with arms & legs & a heart & lungs & a brain so that we can experience, connect with & relate to the world around us.  
We can hear and see and touch and taste and smell and think and feel.

The second thing we need to remember is that Scripture says  
that into that physical being God breathed the breath of life and man became a living soul.  
It's that spirit that God breathed into us that is the image and likeness of a God  
It's that spirit that allows us to experience, connect with, and relate to God.

So we are a physical being with body, mind and heart that connects us with the world,  
and we are a spiritual being with a spirit or soul that connects us with God.

Our minds allow us take the things we see & hear & touch & taste & smell & experience,  
and process, organize and evaluate them through our thoughts and emotions.  
But here's the thing: our brains understand the world in terms of dualities –  
we can't understand good without bad, happiness without sadness, pleasure without pain.  
And whatever can give us the one, can give us the other, or its absence can.

So if two people are in a love relationship,  
the pleasure they experience can very easily turn into pain – or the loss of the relationship can become pain.  
Any emotion that we experience is dependent on external circumstances and our internal processing of them,  
so any emotion is, by nature, transient.

The fruits of the Spirit, however, are not emotions.  
What we normally call love is really the pleasure side of the pleasure/pain duality.  
What we normally call joy is really the happy side of the happy/sad duality.  
What we normally call peace is the calm side of the calm/anxious duality.

The fruits of the Spirit, on the other hand, have no opposites,  
because they are not emotions that arise from the mind or from external circumstances.  
They come directly from God's Spirit to our spirits.  
And that transfer happens when we connect with God on a spiritual level.

So how do we do that?

First, we must understand that we are never going to find lasting hope, or peace, or love, or joy in external circumstances.  
If we find ourselves saying, "If only I had better health, or the right person to love, or a job I enjoyed,  
or this, or that, or the other thing, then I would have joy or love or peace",  
we will never find what we're looking for.

Second, we must understand that the only place we will find what we desire is in God.

And so to find that hope, that peace, that joy, that love that we seek, we must connect with God.

And we connect with God when we trust that no matter what the external circumstances in our lives,  
and no matter what our thoughts and feelings are about them, God is with us –  
above us, below us, before us, behind us, beside us, around us & most of all within us,  
and when we open ourselves to God's power and love we connect with the source of all that we desire.

In the midst of their grief and sorrow, the Israelites found joy.  
Despite the horrors they had experienced,  
they gave thanks to the Most High God who is good and whose mercy endures forever.

Over the past year I've been learning how to access that hope, & peace, & love & joy in my life.  
Sure there are times when I fail – when those things elude me,  
times when the changes and chances of life feel too challenging,  
times when my thoughts and feelings overwhelm my spirit.  
But there have also been times when people have said to me,  
"How can you be so hopeful?" or "What is it that makes your face shine?" or "That joy you have? I want that!"

The hope and peace and joy and love that God offers are not emotions that are here one day and gone the next,  
but the miraculous fruits of the Spirit that God plants within us.  
God plants those seeds and waters them in baptism and then all we need to do is to nurture them so they can grow.

My prayer for you this Advent is  
that God would help you clear away the weeds of external circumstances and internal thoughts and feelings  
and allow the light of God's presence to shine on your spirits to produce in you all the fruits which you desire –  
a hope that springs eternal,  
a peace that passes all understanding,  
and a joy that fills your heart and makes it overflow with love.

May it be so in you and in me.

Thanks be to God! **Amen**