

Let There Be Joy

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound^[a] and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, Christ will do this.

This 3rd Sunday in Advent is a day dedicated to joy. I want to talk about joy today.

Which is already a bit of a conundrum, because there is not one of you that would say, “the best way for us to experience joy is to have David talk about it.”

But here we are. What are you gonna’ do? So, what is joy? You know it when you *feel* it.

I saw it yesterday in the streets of Marrakech in Morocco when their soccer team made it to the semifinals of the World Cup—the first nation from Africa to ever to do that. Thousands of Moroccans bouncing, hugging, laughing, delirious in their joy. Sports at its best.

What else brings joy? Getting lost in your favorite activity. Playing an instrument or singing in the choir, I used to yo-yo, reading a book on a lazy afternoon. Walking in the woods, feeling the ground under your feet and the canopy of trees over your head. All of it is joy.

Spending time with a friend or a lover—with someone who knows you and accepts you. That’s joy. Celebrating a milestone, a birthday, a big accomplishment; celebrating struggles we’ve overcome—an addiction, a last cancer treatment. That’s joy. How about helping someone—lightening someone else’s load, being there for someone else in their need. That’s joy.

The best way of all to access joy is to spend time with kids. I remember a few years ago, I forgot to reserve a Christmas tree in advance (parents, don’t every do that). We had a challenging time finding a Christmas tree—we ended up in Lawrenceville. And I was exhausted. When all the decorating was over, it was late. Our youngest came up to me, took my hand, and said, “Dad, will you come sit with me and we can look at the Christmas tree together.” And we turned out the lights in the room, and sat next to each other and looked at that little tree. And sitting right between us was... joy.

Joy is an intense kind of happiness. It’s good for us. Joyful people are healthier and less anxious. But because it’s an emotion, it’s not something we can conjure or control. You can’t snap your fingers and be joyful. Joy is not something we can buy, although capitalism is adept at convincing us we can. Ownership is not joy. Where does joy come from? How do we find it?

In the examples I shared—the World Cup, singing in the choir, walking in the forest, spending time with friends, being with children—what do they all have in common? It’s the feeling that

we are connected. The feeling that you are part of something. You belong. That you are not separate, alone. You *belong*. That feeling of belonging—that is joy.

Our nation's foremost chronicler of joy right now is a man named Ross Gay. He is a poet. His newest book is called "Inciting Joy." His last book of essays was called "The Book of Delights." Every day for a year, Gay sat down to write about what delighted him. It reads like a journal, the unremarkable details of a middle-age Black man. But the brilliance is watching Gay knit together all of these connections—he "finds himself"—in the garden, with a neighbor, in the flow of cultural and political events. Everywhere Gay is asking, "where do I *fit* in all of this?"

Gay says, "joy is— for me, the moments when my alienation from people — and not just people, from the whole thing —*goes away*." Gay calls it "joy-ning." In every human encounter, he says, there's always the possibility for some kind of tenderness. It doesn't always happen; we sometimes get scared, and we choose something else. But everywhere, all the time, is this potential for you to connect, to feel oneness. To feel joy.

Joy is not reserved only for moments when life is good. We sometimes think it is. That we have to wait for joy until all our problems are solved, until our to do list is finished, until everyone around us is happy and healthy—then, we can have joy. But that's not true. We never truly free ourselves from sadness—it's always with us—it's the cost of being mortal and loving others. Joy—this connection we can access—with the earth, with each other, with our kids—emerges most often and most powerfully in our sadness. Joy says "you belong to something—you belong alongside, you belong with, you belong to—and this belonging is such a delight that it is at the very least equal to and most likely greater than any pain, even death.

That's what I read Paul encouraging us to experience when he writes this letter to the Thessalonians. He says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. Do not quench the Spirit."

Nobody is happy all the time. Nobody prays all day long. Nobody always gives thanks. If you hear this passage as a command to go and be joyful, you will be frustrated and become the opposite of joyful.

It's not a command. It's an invitation—rejoice always. Always look around. Just beneath the illusion of our separateness is a oneness waiting to be discovered and affirmed. Pray without ceasing means, for God's sake, open up a channels of communication between you and God. Open your eyes. Open your ears. See, hear, know that this life is an intricate miracle, each of us joined to every other thing, and all of us knit together with love by God. Give thanks.

Advent is a funny season. It is, we are always told, a season of preparation. Watch and wait, keep your lamps trimmed and burning. Spiritually prepare yourself for the coming of God. Remember, the Advent purists say, we wait not for the birth of the baby Jesus. That happened long ago—in Advent, we prepare for the 2nd Coming of Christ. The return of Christ that will bring with it, our tradition promises, a realization of the fullness of God.

Christians over the centuries have waited with anticipation for that 2nd Coming—it's what Paul and the Thessalonians were waiting for in 51 CE when this passage was written. Some Christians will say the 2nd Coming of Christ will bring the destruction of the enemies of God. I've always had reservations about people who wait with glee for a bloody apocalypse.

What do we wait for? Truly? If the Thessalonians were waiting in 51 CE and we're still waiting today, isn't it about time we throw in the towel and admit Jesus isn't coming to get us? I don't think so. Not yet. I always go back to the words of Jesus for clues about what we are waiting for. I think Jesus is clear: we are to wait for the coming of the "basileia tou theou," in Greek—the Empire of God. We call it the Kingdom of God—Beloved Community: heaven coming to earth. I've always loved the imagery in the 21st chapter of Revelation:

"See, the home of God is among us.
He will dwell with us;
we will be God's peoples,
and God will be with us and be our God;
⁴ God will wipe every tear from our eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

It will be the dawn of true justice for all people. Enemies become friends. Debts are forgiven. Wounds are healed, forgiveness requested and graciously given. Harmony achieved between human beings and the natural world. Generosity leaves no room for selfishness. Every relationship expressing love. That's the 2nd coming that I wait for... that I long for.

In short, it's a world in which we finally realize just how much we need each other. And how connected we really are.

That is the world that Jesus came to show us, a world of oneness, of love, of deep interconnection. A world of joy.

There's a lot to do at Christmastime. A lot of tasks. There's also a lot of emotional labor. There's grief, and hard stuff to hold. But by all means in Advent, open your eyes and your ears. Watch and watch. Watch some soccer. Sing carols. Walk in the woods. Help lighten someone's load. Draw a bit closer to children. We are connected. We are part of something. We are not separate, alone. We belong, through Christ, to God and to each other.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice! Joy to the world, the Lord is come.