

Illuminated by Joy

JOY

December 22, 2019

Psalm 30: 1-5 and 11-12

¹ I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. ² O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. ³ O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. ⁴ Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. ⁵ For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. ¹¹ You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹² so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

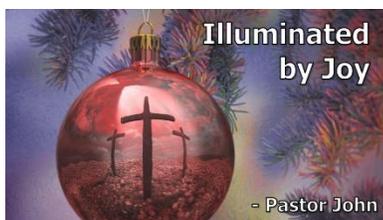
Isaiah 7: 10-14

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹ Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹² But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³ Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.

Romans 1: 1-7

¹ Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³ the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David

according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. ⁷ To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

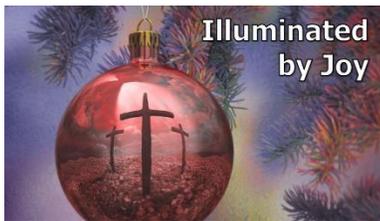
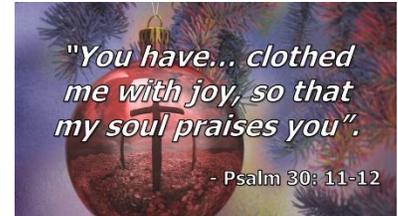


Our Advent journey began with an invitation to peace. As we have worked our way to today, to day 22, have you found more peace in your life? Have you

transitioned from an "almost peace" to an "altogether peace"? Our next stop was tangible hope. Again, as we have come to the fourth week of Advent, have you claimed the "altogether hope" that Christ offers, both in this life and for the life to come? Or are you still living out an "almost hope"? Last week our Advent pilgrimage took us to Nazareth and into Mary and Elizabeth's lives. In declaring themselves servants of the Most High, in stepping fully into God's love and plans, they claimed an "altogether love". For each of these weeks of Advent we have also been connecting in John Wesley and our Methodist heritage. With knowledge gained from our "Almost Christian" Advent study, we have been privy to what it looks like to live an altogether peace, hope, and love. Today we turn return to the road, seeking to come away with an "altogether joy". Let us pray...

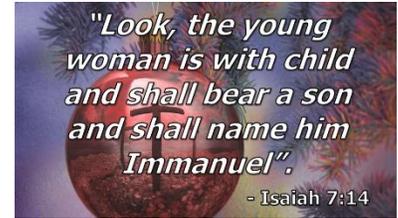
In the first passage for today, Psalm 30, the writer sings praises to God for the healing and restoration that he has experienced. Feeling like he was on the edge of hell, the psalmist rejoices that God has broken into his life, bringing

wholeness. He calls upon us to sing praises as well. In verse five we hear echoes from last week's scriptures. In verse five we read, *"For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning"*. Last week Mary and Elizabeth experienced joy as they both found favor with the Lord. Like Mary bursting into song, the psalmist proclaims in verses eleven and twelve, *"you have... clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you"*. As children of God, we too have all found favor with God. God wants to clothe us with joy as well. But, unfortunately, too often we accept an "almost joy", not quite living the life that God intends for us to live.

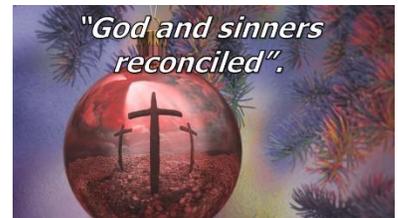


Turning to Isaiah 7, we find King Ahaz, one who claimed an "almost joy". Ahaz was the king of Judah. As we get to the second passage for today, Ahaz is feeling under siege. Ahaz has aligned Judah with several other local kings, seeking to defend themselves from the coming storm. Isaiah goes to Ahaz and reassures him – God says that the Assyrians will not be victorious against Ahaz. As we pick up the reading for today, the Lord is speaking to Ahaz, asking him to inquire of God for a sign. But, in verse twelve, Ahaz acts humble, saying he does not want to put God to the test. God has offered Ahaz very much – the sign will be *"deep as Sheol or high as heaven"*. On the one hand, the sign will be higher than any human could hope to reach. The other sign – found in Sheol – is deeper than one would ever dare to venture. Either would be too great for Ahaz, so he is reluctant to ask. But God insists. The magnitude of what God has to share is amazing. The joy that will burst forth will be impossible to contain.

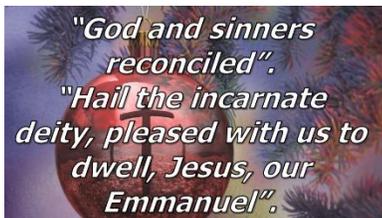
There, in verse fourteen, we read, *"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel"*. Like the shoot from a dead stump, like the life in bloom, life will come in the form of Immanuel, which means "God with us". The sign will reside neither in heaven nor down in Sheol. The sign comes right here on earth, right in the middle of life. In fact, it lands right there in Bethlehem, as we Christians like to tell the story.



Right there, in Bethlehem, joy will be born. There is much joy in the birth of Christ. We sang about this joy in song today as we sang "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing". Right there, about half way through the first line, we sang, *"God and sinners reconciled"*.



Salvation and joy go hand in hand. Christ came to save us. He came to save you and me. Of this the angels sing. Knowing this, we feel great joy. Joy is the assurance that God is with us. We sang of this too. Right there, in verse two, we sang, *"Hail the incarnate*



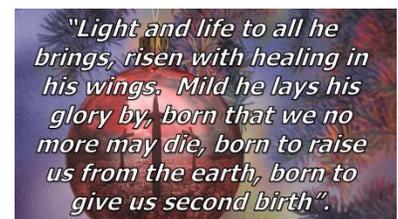
deity, pleased with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel".

Emmanuel, God with us. And we cannot leave out the

third verse: *"Light and life to all he brings, risen with*

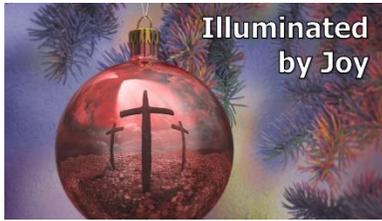
healing in his wings. Mild he

lays his glory by, born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth".

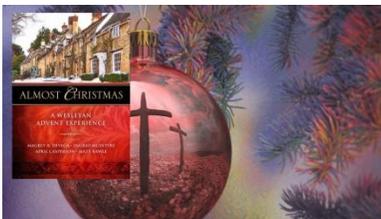


Christ was born to bring us light and life and healing.

Jesus set aside glory so that he could die – so that he could die to raise us to eternal life, to give us second birth. If that does not fill you with joy, you had better come back on Tuesday night.

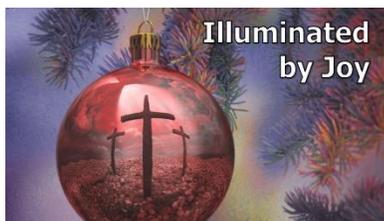


On Tuesday night we will gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world. I do not know about you, but sometimes for me this season feels like such a rush. For me, and I think for many, the feeling only accelerates as December 24th nears. It is a hectic time of the year. All of this makes it very important for me to be intentional about carving out time and space to connect to God, to renew my faith, to ground myself in the peace, hope, love, and joy that Advent offers. I have been blessed this year by two opportunities to do just that. On Sunday evenings I have joined others as we sat quietly in the candlelit Sanctuary, reading scriptures and praying to God. On Wednesday afternoons I have sat in the pew and listened to Christmas music in a quiet and reflective place as I ate my sack lunch. Each time on Wednesday has been ended with us joining voices and spirits to sing a few carols as a small community of faith. Times of worship have also been a blessing. Sunday mornings and the service last night and soon worship on Christmas Eve – all will draw me closer to God. Coming together as the community of faith, worshipping in song and word and sacrament, I am renewed and strengthened and reconnected to both God and to my communities of faith.



In our Advent study book, author Matt Rawle declares that Christ in the manger is the manifestation of joy. In that event, God chose to put on flesh and enter the world as a helpless baby. As he grew and walked the earth and ministered, joy was embodied by Christ as he lived with hands outstretched to bless, to comfort, to welcome others into relationship and community. Rawle points out that Jesus had feet that walked with flawed disciples, had hands that washed their feet, and had a spirit that traversed boundaries and crossed barriers to walk in Samaritan

lands. The writer also points out that ultimately those hands and feet, that spirit, will be outstretched and nailed to a cross. As it was with Jesus, a life of service is always a life of sacrifice. This too is part of our Advent story.



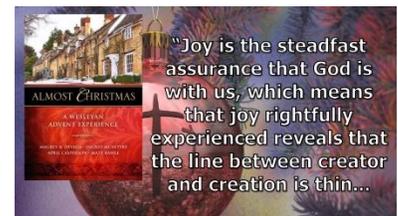
The life that Jesus modeled is also part of our faith story and of our traditions as United Methodists. Hands, feet, and spirit reaching out into community, seeking to build relationships, has always been a part of our denominational leanings. A life of service and sacrifice was very much the life that John Wesley sought to live as he sought to be an “altogether Christian”. Jesus and disciples ever since have sought to live out his “altogether joy” as Christians have sought to be light and love in a dark world – to live a life illuminated by joy. But like last Sunday’s “altogether love”, choosing to live an altogether joy can also be messy and scary and irrational. Consequently, we often choose to live an “almost joy”.

In a life that lives out an “almost joy” we seek something more akin to happiness instead of joy. Happiness depends on our circumstances and upon how we “feel”. Joy, on the other hand, comes from our steadfast assurance that God is with us. That is the story of Jesus, our Immanuel, our God with us. An “altogether joy” is a joy that can even be experienced in the midst of pain. We read about that earlier in Psalm 30: *“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning”*. In those moments of weeping we recognize our need to be drawn up by God. A little while later in the Psalms, in Psalm 139, we read, *“O Lord, you know me and search me”*. In this verse we are reminded that God longs to know us and to know our thoughts. The psalmist continues with these words of encouragement: *“You know when I sit down and rise up”*.

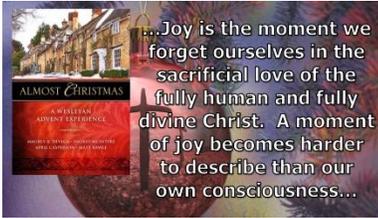
In these words, we are reminded that God is always with us, always aware of us, always concerned with us. Here we begin to grasp the depth of God's heart and to gain a glimpse of his vast love for us. It is a love we are called to emulate.

This God that took on flesh and dwelt among us is the same omnipresent and omnipotent God that the writer of Psalm 139 refers to. In this Psalm we come to understand that God is always everywhere, that God has no limits. Our omniscient God is not bound by human intellect and emotion. Our omnipotent God is not bound by walls, real or otherwise. When we study the life and teachings and ministry of Jesus, we see that Jesus mirrored these qualities as well. Jesus ministered to one and all, touched the untouchable, loved the unlovable, worked through human barriers and prejudices and stereotypes, always living a life of service and sacrifice, always bringing an altogether peace, hope, love, and joy into all the darkness and hurting of the world. Often the joy that Jesus brought was indescribable. How else would you describe the joy that cleansed you and brought you back into community? How else would you describe the joy that returned life where there was only death? How else would you describe the joy that Mary and others felt in front of that empty tomb?

On page 103 author Matt Rawle shares these words about joy: *"Joy is the steadfast assurance that God is with us, which means that joy rightfully experienced reveals that the line between creator and creation is thin."*

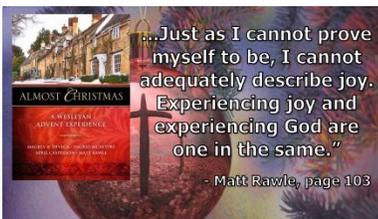


Yes, the line is thin. When we experience an "altogether joy", based upon God's presence with us, we experience that God is as close as our next breath. This closeness is joy rightly experienced. Rawle goes on to write:



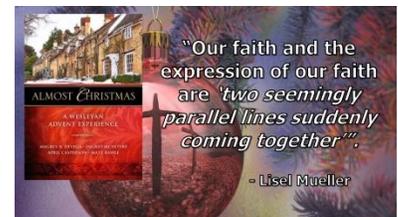
Joy is the moment we forget ourselves in the sacrificial love of the fully human and fully divine Christ. A moment of joy becomes harder to describe than our own consciousness.

I believe Rawle is correct. In the moment when we truly forget ourselves and are fully present to and totally engaged in being sacrificial love for one another, we experience the joy of Christ's sacrificial love. That place, that connection, that feeling – it is hard to describe. Rawle concludes the paragraph this way:



Just as I cannot prove myself to be, I cannot adequately describe joy. Experiencing joy and experiencing God are one in the same”.

When we live out our faith, we experience God and we share God with others. In that sense, we shine God's light out into the world. When we live our lives in close connection to God, we are illuminated by God's light. In turn, we are illuminated by joy. Our faith and our expression of our faith are one and the same. As author Lisel Mueller puts it, “Our faith and the expression of our faith are *‘two seemingly parallel lines suddenly coming together’*”. In the birth we will celebrate this idea. The fully divine and the fully human come together as Christ comes to earth. In just two days we will celebrate the line between human and divine coming together.



This is why we lit the candle of joy at the end of the season of Advent this year in our church. Joy is where words fail. After all the other candles have been lit, after all the liturgy has been read, after the programs and events have been presented, all that's left is God in the flesh. Jesus will become the tangible presence of our assurance that God is with us. All that is left is to point to the manger. There is nothing else that needs to be done. Joy is our sure and steadfast assurance that God is with us. May we rejoice, going forth to illumine the world with joy and hope and light. May all we do and say and think point to the one who brings the divine into the world. May all we do and say and think glorify Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. Author Matt Rawle writes "a life of service is always a life of sacrifice". How could your faith grow more in this area?
- 2) Pray. We are almost at Christmas Eve. How do you need God to be more present in your faith and in your life? Go to God in prayer!!
- 3) Serve. When has serving or giving to another sacrificially brought you a joy that was hard to describe?