

Joy Is Not Made To Be A Crumb  
Psalm 100  
November 27, 2022  
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Joy to the world!  
Consider it joy!  
Make a joyful noise!

Today we enter the Advent season on a high note—one of proclaiming joy to the world, and listening as the psalmist says that we should make a joyful noise! And surely our church is full of joyful noises today—as we sing our advent songs, as we light our candles in joyful expectancy, as we look forward in this season to the many opportunities for fellowship, giving and serving each other and our neighbors.

And yet, we know that joy is much more complicated than these high-note moments. For many, the holiday season is a deeply challenging time—when some are reminded of families who are not accepting of their identities, when mental health crises peak, when (in the northern hemisphere) the days are shorter and people spend less time together, when domestic violence rises due to people being at home more, when loneliness flourishes, when there's just something going on that won't allow you to feel the excitement and magic and happiness of the season. All of those emotions are valid, dear church. You are not alone in feeling distant from the highs of the season. And if you are in need of assistance, please reach out.

This year during Advent, we are being attentive to revelation...not the last book of the Bible that describes an apocalyptic vision, but revelation itself—the act of unveiling something, the act of something being revealed to us. Advent is a time of waiting, as our candle-lighting wreath liturgy said earlier...but while we wait, revelations may be found all around us.

On this first Sunday in Advent, I think it is appropriate that we hold Joy as our theme for our worship. Because like the holiday season, joy is complex. Joy is not just one thing, it is not easy to define. There are many pathways to experiencing joy, and many aspects of joy. Often, joy is something that is revealed to us underneath or within something else—but a key to experiencing joy is that we must be present to its unveiling.

But how do we be present to revelations of joy? And actually, what IS joy? In preparation for my sermon, I found myself wondering about the relationship between joy and happiness. So, of course, I turned to one of my favorite sermon-prep resources: Disney Pixar movies.

Who here has seen the movie Inside Out? This Disney Pixar movie from 2015 is about a young girl, Riley, who moves from the Midwest to San Francisco. She has a lot of adjusting to do in her new life, as she left behind her school and friends and her hockey team for the hills and city life of the Bay area. And, her emotions have a lot of adjusting to do as well. The movie portrays

Riley's internal landscape with the personified emotions of Joy, Sadness, Anger and Disgust balancing how they process the events of daily life. Joy is a character with bright blue hair and a golden glow, always on the move, bouncing around to make sure that Riley is happy, which she thinks means protected from all hints of Disgust, Anger and Sadness. Joy actually seems to think Sadness, who is an Eeyore-like weepy-eyed being with a blue hue, is her nemesis, and she tries to thwart everything Sadness does. Over the course of the movie, without giving away spoilers, Joy must realize that the emotions can coexist...and in fact, the balance between all of these emotions is what provides for a full and healthy life.

So with that movie in mind, I turned to my next favorite sermon-prep resource: Facebook. I asked my online community "what is the difference between joy and happiness?" Over 50 people engaged with the post—from my seminary colleagues to friends to my elementary school teacher and former flute tutor and clergy colleagues from many denominations and, of course, some of you. And the answers were amazing. So I'd like to share some of what I observed as I was absorbing these comments.

In general, most people described happiness as an emotional state affected by external factors. Happiness is an emotion that you feel when something is going right: you got the job, your family are healthy, you took a beautiful vacation, you ate a delicious meal. Several folks described happiness as "contentment" or "satisfaction," and Rev. Doug Avilesbernal reminded me of Augustine's understanding of happiness as "being aware of having enough." Happiness is reactive to outside things, it is centered around the self. Happiness to some is related to the life choices we make—it is part of our journey, as are sadness and anger and love. Aaron pointed out that one of the values of the founding of this country (along with all the complexity, of course) is "the pursuit of happiness," so happiness is something that we can chase after, like a trophy. And my linguist friend pointed out that "happy" comes from the same root word as "happen" and "hap," which are related to luck and chance.

However, when people were sharing about joy, there was a word that almost everyone repeated in some way: deep. Joy is a deep, internal thing. Joy is a practice. Joy is experienced among a community or, at the least, is not self-centered. And many folks talked about joy as being a spiritual or God-given feeling, not subject to the whims of daily life, but something that is cultivated alongside inner peace and relationship to the Great Something Else that many of us call "God." Joy is a deep well that we can tap into, a sense of awareness and gratitude for what is good, even when life circumstances are difficult, scary, or oppressive. A friend from seminary reminded me of those words to the old hymn, "the world didn't give it, the world can't take it away." The world doesn't give joy and the world can't take joy away—joy is something that bubbles up spontaneously, or that can be tapped into in individual moments. Brent said, "Joy is the inner peace and spirit that comes from embracing everything that comes your way and celebrating the ability to experience the good and the bad because it means that you have lived life." Joy is a way of being that sustains you.

We can choose to live joyfully—that doesn't mean that we choose to see everything that happens to us as good or beneficial, or that nothing sad or hard or scary occurs in our world. Living joyfully does not mean that we are ignoring the world, or living with our heads in the sand. Choosing to live with attention to joy means that we are awake to the opportunity for joy—that when joy is brought into view, we are open to it. We have the emotional space to welcome it. We hold open the doors of our heart to this momentary feeling of delight, glee and connectedness with that Something Bigger Than Us. Living joyfully does not mean that we do not experience the emotions of sadness, anger, disgust, despair, frustration or hurt; it means that we exist beyond those emotions, as a whole person still capable of a deep internal gladness, even just for a moment. Our capacity as humans is to encompass many emotions, to find ourselves through feeling our feelings and knowing ourselves through the fullness of experience.

In this Advent season of expectant waiting, I think of Mary, mother of Jesus. A teenage girl visited by an angel, given a revelation from the Most High—given an opportunity for an incomparable experience that could lead her to joy or pain or sorrow or elation—or all of them mixed up together. And Mary said, “Let it be with me as you have said.” In this moment of revelation, Mary took on the expectant waiting of pregnancy, the slow formation of new life within; she took on the uncertainty of answering God's call affirmatively; she took on the complexity of pregnancy as an unwed teenager with a low class status in a backwater area in an oppressed society...and yet...we read the words of the Magnificat. Mary sings, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” She goes on to sing of the promises of the Holy One to the oppressed, the downtrodden, the forgotten, the poor...and through all, Mary's joy is undiminished. Mary is looking at the world as it is, experiencing the complexity of her situation, and singing of joy to the world—she makes a joyful noise that tells of the revelation of God to the world.

Mary sings of a revelation of joy, the revelation of joy she herself is experiencing...honestly looking at the reality of her life and the reality of life around her, and being open to the possibility. I like to think about Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth, maybe sitting by the fireside and knitting, quoting psalms and talking about the deep things of women and laughing and crying together. Perhaps psalm 100 came to their mind, and when called upon to make a joyful noise, Mary sang forth the Magnificat.

A couple thousand years later, another Mary, Mary Oliver, wrote this about joy:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate.

Give in to it.

There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.

We are not wise, and not very often kind.

And much can never be redeemed.

Still, life has some possibility left.

Perhaps this is its way of fighting back,

that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world.

It could be anything,

but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins.  
Anyway, that's often the case.  
Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty.  
Joy is not made to be a crumb.

Dear ones, whatever joy means to you—whether you often find opportunity for joy to surprise you, or challenging to find joy given all that is going on in your life, or if you are somewhere in between...this day, I invite you to open yourself to the possibility of a revelation of joy. Remember the wisdom of the movie Inside Out, the wisdom of Facebook community, the wisdom of the poets, the wisdom of your own hearts...joy is many things. Joy is complex. Joy is deep. Joy is personal. Joy is tender and bubbles up and is drawn from a well within. Joy is not the nemesis of Sadness. Joy is not a bandaid and joy is not denial. Joy is not made to be a crumb. Beloved church, may each of you know, deep within your heart, in this Advent season and beyond, that you are made for joy. May you open yourselves to the revelations of joy, whatever they are, that come to you as we prepare our hearts for the Mystery of Christmas. May it be so. Amen.