

12.17.23 – Third Sunday of Advent – JOY

“The Unexpected Joy of Jesus”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (NIV)

¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
² to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor.
⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.

⁸ “For I, the Lord, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants will be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge
that they are a people the Lord has blessed.”
¹⁰ I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,

so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.

Leader: These Prophetic Words of JOY Are of God!

All: Thanks be to God!

John 1:6-8, 19-28 (NLT)

⁶ God sent a man, John the Baptist, ⁷ to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. ⁸ John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light . . .

The Testimony of John the Baptist

¹⁹ This was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He came right out and said, “I am not the Messiah.”

²¹ “Well then, who are you?” they asked. “Are you Elijah?”

“No,” he replied.

“Are you the Prophet we are expecting?”

“No.”

²² “Then who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?”

²³ John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“I am a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Clear the way for the Lord’s coming!’”

²⁴ Then the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ asked him, “If you aren’t the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?”

²⁶ John told them, “I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. ²⁷ Though his ministry follows mine, I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal.”

²⁸ This encounter took place in Bethany, an area east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.

Leader: These Words of Expectation Are of God. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, our Savior, peacebuilder, promise of hope, and the one who gives us unexpected joy, we worship you today with Scripture, prayer, music, and candles. May we continue this Advent season with love in mind for all four weeks. And Lord, we express our Joy today, so we pray specifically for those who cannot feel the joy of knowing you. We pray for those who are hurting or have not called upon you to bring them joy in this season. Let us find joy in studying your word, in its poetry, history, prophecy, and wisdom. Let us share the unexpected joy of knowing Jesus with others. Speak to us in your Words and your voice through this servant messenger. Amen.

Merry Christmas again! Today, we have our poinsettias in place, and I wish to thank Bill Harward for picking them up and the team who placed them, the Joneses, Debbie, and Elmer and everyone else who purchased them this year! After next Sunday's service, you may take the ones you ordered home with you or share them with a loved one!

Also, please remember that on Christmas Eve this year, our special service will be Sunday at 11:00 am with a woodwind quintet and a guest or two for our vocal ensemble. I hope you'll attend, and invite your families, neighbors, and friends to join us, using the bulletin inserts and the extra ones on the hall tables. Take one or two to give out!

Today's Advent lesson about Joy may be difficult for some, but for most of us, we've been celebrating now for several weeks! You may have been surprised to hear again about John the Baptist, but because this Lectionary reading is from a different Gospel, we'll get to that in a moment. The Isaiah 61 passage is a familiar one that we read at many Christmas Eve services. We may wonder how the prophet knew that a Messiah was coming, yet there were signs. Israel's kings, Saul and David, were both anointed and received God's blessing to serve. Likewise, the divinely conceived Christ was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism by John the Baptizer. The Hebrew word, *mashiach* means "the Anointed one," while the Greek form *Christos* comes from *chrío* "to anoint." Jesus later even recited Isaiah 61:1-2a from the scroll in the Synagogue in Nazareth, recorded in Luke 4:16-21. The third sign was evidence from Jesus' own ministry and mission to preach good news, to heal the sick and free the enslaved, to proclaim the Lord's favor and vengeance (61:2), and to comfort (61:2-3). The last sign is about his return when Israel will

rebuild her ruined cities. This everlasting covenant reassured them that they are God's chosen people. The prophecy consoled the exiles in Isaiah's time and consoles us now as we anticipate Christ's return.

Is poetry a joyful undertaking? For some, yes. Is evangelism a task filled with joy? Possibly. In Isaiah's poetry, he does not claim to be joyful, a servant, or the evangelist mentioned; yet he was consecrated and sent by the Lord God Yahweh to declare the good news of freedom to the captives in Babylon. With our New Testament eyeglasses, we know that John the Baptist was the evangelist sent to prepare us for the Messiah, and that Jesus Christ's ministry fulfills this prophecy. He was sent to the distressed and downhearted; he came to free those bound in slavery, whether it's human slavery like trafficking or figurative slavery like addiction, violence, alcoholism, or poverty. It is a type of release that because of the heavy burden, there is a deep joy of satisfaction, but maybe not of happiness per se. You must decide which joy you'll receive and experience from Christ's guidance today.

Isaiah's language is so beautiful: the oil of gladness, garlands that evoke images of spring flowers and greenery in a desert, and the oaks of righteousness standing in our minds as towers of hope and endurance. I read these words today with a joyful expectation of the Christ child's birth, yet we cannot study this without knowing that humankind's vengeance was attempted at the cross. How do we reconcile the joy of a new baby coming next week with what we know is the tree upon which that baby as a man was tortured and killed for our sakes? How do we sing with joy? We become joyful by witnessing an empty tomb! I got chills peering into that dark tomb in Israel where Jesus had been wrapped, laid,

and anointed yet again with oil and fragrances, but was not there! Each Easter, we rejoice at the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, knowing that our salvation is complete in his fulfillment of this prophecy. His resurrection is the proof and unexpected joy in Jesus we must remember at his birth at Christmas.

The same anointed spirit of saving grace and restitution that we fortunate believers experience shall be for any nation who believes in this loving and forgiving God:

¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations (Is 61:11).

Isaiah 61:11 prophesies how big Christ's ministry will become even before Paul shares his testimony with the Gentiles, before Barnabus and Mark went on to Turkey, and before Christian missionary movements flourished around the world.

This is more of the unexpected Joy of Jesus foretold in the bigger picture of time. Let us move on briefly to the New Testament passage. When John the Baptist came on the scene, the people thought he might actually be the Messiah or Elijah the prophet returned as told in Deuteronomy 18:15: “⁵The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me (Moses) from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him.” The interesting thing to note is that although John the Baptist was a messenger of repentance, preparing the way for Jesus as we learned last week, he was also chosen specifically to be a **witness** and proclaimer of God's incarnate son sent to save the world. As he baptized Jesus, John witnessed the Holy Spirit descend upon him announcing Christ's divine

purpose. The first five verses in the Gospel according to John point to Jesus and his divinity [“he was with God from the beginning...”], but the world’s evil and darkness could not comprehend the good and lightness Jesus would bring. So then, in verse 6, we read there was a man sent from God whose name was John. We know he was sent by God because of Zecharia and Elizabeth’s lack of physical fertility. But he was still a man, a coarse one at that, yet a truthful witness to Jesus the Messiah: “¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16-17).”

That is our unexpected message of Joy for the season! Christ was sent to us for us, and still lives in us, though crucified! So, we have much to be joyful about, wouldn’t you agree? May the rest of this Advent season be a time to share this joy with others, out of the love of the father in heaven. Amen! ||

Please pray with me. All knowing and loving God, we thank you for all we experience from your generous Spirit. We ask now for more joy in our own lives so that we may share it with others. Help us reach out to those we don’t know to share your loving and restorative grace that comes from salvation through Christ. May we also be open to unexpected joys this season so that **we** may reflect the light of your Spirit. It is in your Son, Jesus’ name we pray, **Amen.**