

**Advent 3B, December 15, 2020, St. Anne's
Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24; John 1:6–8, 19–28**

Well, here we are on the Sunday of Joy, and I'll bet that most of us aren't feeling very joyful. At Christmas there's lots of *talk* about 'joy' but we generally misunderstand what it actually is - in large part because we tend to confuse **joy** and **happiness**. And so, when life is not going according to plan, or when something dreadful happens in the world – like terrorist acts or, I don't know, say a worldwide pandemic to pick something at random – we aren't *happy* and so we think joy is out of the picture. But joy is *not* the same as happiness. Happiness is defined as feelings of *pleasure*, or the result of living a *good life* (whatever 'good life' means for *you*). Joy on the other hand is deeper than that. Joy is a calm spirit, a kind of deep gladness of heart and the experience of *gratitude*. It is also the deep satisfaction we experience when we help others, and when we're glad for *other* people's good fortune. Joy is an essential spiritual practice that grows out of faith, gratitude, hope, and love. At its most basic level, joy is the pure and simple delight in *being alive*. We might say that *happiness* is the result of *getting* what you *want* and *joy* is the result of being content with what you *get*.

On this third Sunday of Advent we focus on *joy*. During Advent we are preparing for Christmas - but not just the fun and social Christmas of trees and gifts and eggnog. Advent is about preparing our *spirit* to welcome Christ into our hearts by focusing on the spiritual gifts of hope and peace and joy and love. Advent is about preparing our lives to receive the transforming power of Christ.

We might think of the analogy of preparing to welcome a new-born baby into our life. Those of you who are parents know that the arrival of a child – especially a first child – involves a **lot** of preparation. There are all the practical things like buying cribs and diapers and baby clothes, of course. But there are also deeper levels of preparation needed. We might need lifestyle changes to make the transition from being a couple to being parents. For example, being more careful of what and how you eat. Preparation for the arrival of a child might involve a career change, or a move to a new home or neighbourhood. Finances need to be reviewed in the light of the requirements of this new member of the family. And, one of the major changes that comes with parenthood, is the need to pay more attention to another human life than you give to your own. People will sometimes comment that becoming a parent required them to finally ‘grow up’.

Advent encourages us to engage that same level of life-changing preparation as we wait for the coming of the Christ who was and is and is to come. The coming of Christ is always past, present, *and* future. But waiting doesn’t mean being in suspended animation. While we wait and prepare for the coming of the light and life of God into our world, we are invited to live our life in the joyful knowledge that the Christ is *already* here *with* us. In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul reminds us that while we can never ignore the *very real* darkness in our lives and in the world, we are none-the-less called to live our lives in the light of Christ. We are to rejoice, pray, give thanks and hold on to all that is good and kind and loving.

Paul admonishes us to rejoice always and to pray without ceasing. Of course, that’s not exactly easy to pull off – especially when happiness is in

short supply. But Paul is not talking about ignoring the darkness – after all, he suffered more than his fair share of troubles, and yet he stayed grounded in hope and the deep joy of living in relationship with God. And Isaiah, in our reading from Hebrew Scriptures and John the Baptist both lived in hard times - yet stayed focused on what really matters. Neither Paul, nor Isaiah, nor John preaches about happiness but tell of the deep **joy** that carries us through good times *and* bad times.

Just like living in joy doesn't mean always being 'happy' - praying without ceasing doesn't mean a life filled with liturgical mutterings, or thoughts and conversations punctuated with 'dear Lord Jesus'. It's more about living in constant connection with God. Not *endless* praying but making our *life itself* a prayer. Praying without ceasing is about opening ourselves to seeing the holiness shining through every moment - no matter how mundane. When we see the holiness in every moment, we are able to rejoice *even though* grief and pain are a present reality. It doesn't *take away* the grief or the pain, but allows us to *lean into* God when life feels ... unsteady. Living a life of faith doesn't promise us a pain free, easy life - but it *does* give us the ability to find peace in the midst of conflict, joy amid sadness, and tranquility amid the inevitable calamities that come into every life.

Faith that centres on hope and joy and peace, is central to the Advent and Christmas messages. We live in a time of polarization and spiritual superficiality, and so more than ever we need to focus on what unites us and on what helps transforms us into the person God created us to be. When we live in deep connection to God, no matter what happens in our life, no matter

what happens in our *world*, we **can** live in joy and peace beyond our expectations.

So, how are **you** preparing for the presence of Christ in your life this Advent? Where is God already at work in your life and what might you do to work *with* God? Over the next week I invite you to take note of everything good in your life – no matter how small it seems. Focus every day on gratitude for what is good in your life so that you can *build up* your ability to experience **joy**.

My prayer for each of you is that the mystery of the coming of Christ in your life will bring you light and hope and wholeness and **joy**.