

12.15.2024 Advent 3 (Joy)

The final verse of Psalm 16 declares: “*You will show me the path of life: in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand there are pleasures for ever more*” (Psalm 16:11). This psalm was written many centuries before the birth of our Savior, and yet, when we read the Bible in its entirety, considering this psalm from the perspective of both the Old and New Testament, there’s no doubt these words refer not only to God, but to one God in three persons, and especially to our Lord, God in the Person of Jesus Christ.

As we lit the candle of joy this morning, we reflected on the truth that in our Lord’s presence is the *fullness of joy*, and therefore, as those who intimately abide in His Holy presence as members of His Body (Romans 12:4-5), as branches joined to the One True Vine (John 15:4), we are filled with the blessed assurance that the *fullness of joy* is ours at all times and in all places - even those that are most unexpected. In trials, in sorrow, in sickness, in the eye of every storm we experience the joy of the Lord. The fullness of His joy is found in places and in circumstances we would never expect.

Consider examples such as the Apostles who were arrested and beaten for preaching in the name of Jesus, who “*returned home rejoicing*” (Acts 5:41) because they were found worthy of suffering for His name. Think of Paul and Silas in chains, in a first century prison, praying and singing hymns of praise. Consider the perfect example of Christian joy, our Lord who we are told “*for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross*” (Hebrews 12:2). In these examples, and God willing in our lives, we realize that joy is not found in where we are, in what we’re doing, or in how we feel. The joy of the Lord is found in the presence of God, and therefore we can experience joy even in the midst of trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity. In all things we can know true and unspeakable joy because our Lord is Emmanuel, God with us. God is with us, and in His presence is the “*fullness of joy.*”

Holy Scripture is filled with miraculous words and unimaginable works of Divine Power. The centurion asked Jesus to “*speak the word only*” (Matthew 8:8), and his servant was healed. In the midst of a storm, our Lord said, “*Peace, be still*” (Mark 4:39), and even the wind and waves obeyed Him.

The Gospel text this morning records these unimaginable works of Divine Power: *“the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up...”* (Matthew 11:4). Miraculous words and unimaginable works, yet in the final verse of Psalm 16, the psalmist doesn't write about what the world see as miraculous, but speaks only of God's presence. *In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand there are pleasures for ever more.*

This psalm presents us with the message that the fullness of joy is not found in what God says or does, but rather, such joy is found in the fact that God is there with you, that He is here with us. I once heard a story about a woman who scheduled a prayer meeting in her town, but none of the people who lived there attended it. The next day one of the residents of that city, in an attempt to mock her, asked the woman, “How many came to your prayer meeting last night?” “Four,” she said. “Well,” he replied, “I heard you were there all alone.” “No,” she said, “I was the only one you would've seen, but the Father was there, and the Son was there, and the Holy Spirit was there, and the four of us gathered in prayer.” No miraculous words. No unimaginable works. Simply the presence of God - the presence in which we find the *fullness of joy*.

Several weeks ago, we read a passage from Luke's Gospel account in which the disciples, after being sent out into the mission field by Jesus, *“returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name. And He said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven”* (Luke 10:17-20).

In this passage, just as we read in Psalm 16, it's not in miraculous words or unimaginable works that we find the fullness of joy. The disciples returned with joy, but Jesus said, *“... in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.”* In other words, rejoice in your Salvation. Rejoice in the amazing grace that has reconciled you to God. Rejoice that you will spend eternity with Him, for in the presence of God is the *fullness of joy*; at His right hand there are

pleasures for ever more.

Like the disciples who returned with joy because of this victory over the enemy, too often our own human nature tells us that joy is found in successful, mountain top experiences, but that isn't the message presented to us in Scripture. The Bible is filled with examples like those we considered - joy in being found worthy to suffer for our Lord, joy in a first century prison, joy in the Cross of Christ. The fullness of joy is not found in our circumstances, the fullness of joy is found in the presence of God, and perhaps this is why our Lord so often retreated from the crowds to spend time alone with the Father in prayer. Perhaps this is one reason why He told us to do likewise, saying, "*when you pray, go into your closet and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret...*" (Matthew 6:6).

Whether it's private prayer in that secret place, public worship in the house of the Lord, or a personal challenge that causes us to seek greater intimacy with our Creator, in all things we realize the fullness of joy is found only in the presence of our Lord and God, and that's the message of this season. Advent is a time to prepare, to welcome, and to receive joy. To receive Emmanuel, God with us. In the Person of Jesus Christ, God is no longer a distant Spirit high above us in the heavens. In Christ, the Infinite, Triune God has descended to this earth, and, through the Holy Spirit, He indwells every Christian. It's difficult to even begin to wrap our minds around the Almighty God who inhabits eternity, but in Christ, the God-man, who speaks to us in an earthly language, looks at us with human eyes, and touches us with a brother's hand; in Christ, we are able to hear and see, and by His grace, receive that which we do not deserve, and could never earn - an intimate relationship with the God of Heaven and Earth.

The final verse of Psalm 16 declares: "*You will show me the path of life: in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand there are pleasures for ever more*" (Psalm 16:11). In this season, in which so many are searching for joy, may we, who walk the path of life and know the joy of the Lord, may we point others to Christ that they may also experience the *fullness of joy*, and at His right hand, *pleasures for ever more.*