

## Can We Rejoice?

She walked up to her pastor at the church door, after a festive Christmastide service of worship and celebration. She had recently gotten back from a mission trip to one of the poorest nations on earth.

And she confronted her pastor. “How *dare* you, with all the suffering and hunger in the world, speak of joy? The joy of this service was offensive.”

Her pastor considered these words. And he could see her point. Does it seem insensitive and uncaring even to *talk* about joy, amid the brokenness of this twenty-first century world? That’s a question I invite you to think about this morning, as we reflect on what God is saying to us.

How can we rejoice?

In today’s Scriptures, we read of people who don’t seem to have a lot to rejoice about. The psalmist sings of farmers whose tears mingle with the seeds they sow, because they believe the land to be incapable of producing a crop.

The prophet Isaiah tells of Israel's despondent exiles, whose city and whose temple lie in ruins. Isaiah tells of a people whose hopes are on the ash heap. A people whose spirits are weak. A people in mourning.

And centuries later, the apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians, to a small-membership church facing severe persecution by an empire hostile to Christians.

So, on this third Sunday of Advent, it surprises us that all three of these biblical texts resound with joy! How can this be? How can these long-ago people rejoice? And how can we?

My sisters and brothers, they rejoice—and so do we—because of who God is and because of what God does. In today's readings, we hear of a God who is not distant and detached, but active and engaged. We hear of a God who restores. We hear of a God who makes dreams come true.

We hear of a God who is faithful. God has established a covenant with God's people. And even when Israel—even when we—in disobedience *break* our side of the covenant, God *keeps* the covenant made with God's people. God keeps this covenant throughout all generations. Not only in Isaiah's time. In our own time, too. In all times, God has promised to be our God.

And we rejoice in God's faithfulness.

For God provides faithfully. To farmers in a drought-stricken land with dried-up riverbeds, to farmers who have no reason to expect that a crop will grow, God gives a bountiful harvest: abundant, perfect sheaves of wheat. This God of great faithfulness has given all that you have and all that you are. And God who has begun a good work in you will be faithful to complete it. Of this you can be assured, because God has given and continues to give the gift of grace.

We rejoice in this poured-out grace that makes possible a response of commitment to an extravagantly generous God.

With glad hearts, we commit to giving God what belongs to God. You and I belong to God. Our bodies. Our minds. Our hearts. Our spirits. Our selves.

God is taking whatever in your inner being is fragmented and compartmentalized. And God is making you whole. God is making you holy—setting you apart for God's love. For God is love.

But sometimes it's tough to remember to keep focused on this truth. For a lot of people, December is not an easy time. If you've been there, or if you're there now, you know what I

mean. Getting through this season of the year can be difficult, when there's been a loss. When the circle is no longer complete. When there's an empty place at the table. When there's a yearning for what was. When loneliness is a daily companion. When it seems as though everybody *else* in the world is making merry. When memories seem to be all that's left. When grief is keenly felt.

Yet somehow, in some way, you know that out of even the hardest, most painful, most tragic circumstances, God brings good. You worship and serve a compassionate God who cares. Who comforts. Who enfolds you into loving presence. Who reaches way down into the deepest parts of you and soothes the suffering that's there. Who heals your hurting places. Who transforms your weeping into rejoicing.

We rejoice in the love of God who loves with a limitless love. A steadfast love. An everlasting love.

And this loving God is doing a new thing. God has brought and is bringing and will bring a new reality into being. This new reality pervades Paul's letter to his little handful of new believers at Thessalonica. He tells them something that must have amazed them. Paul tells them—and tells us—to rejoice!

But somewhere along the way, we may have been taught that Christians are supposed to go around looking solemn and somber. Dismal and dour. Now I don't know about that. Someone gave me a picture of Jesus laughing. And I like to think of him that way.

Maybe Paul liked to think of him that way, too. As Ann Jervis observes, "Since [for Paul], joy is part of the character of Christ...Rejoicing is a means to becoming like Christ."

Paul urges and encourages us to rejoice *always*, in *all* circumstances. Because no matter what happens, no matter how terrible the situation, no one can take this new reality, this new way of being, away from us. It's already present. It's not yet totally accomplished. But—like the advent of the One who inaugurates it—its arrival is certain and sure.

We rejoice in the coming fulfillment of a new creation.

The coming of a new world order that will culminate in the year of jubilee foretold in Torah—a time when the land would be cared for, when debts would be forgiven, when *all* would be treated with fairness and integrity.

Isaiah announces the coming of this year: the year of the Lord's favor. Which we understand not as a literal year, but as

that time when God's reign will be ushered in. Ancient Israel stood in need of such a time. And surely today, our own need of such a time is just as profound.

For today, God's land is cleared and stripped and exploited and ravaged for the sake of profit. But the year of the Lord's favor is coming, when the land will once again be cared for by human creatures, us whom God has charged with stewardship of this good earth.

And still today, many struggle and are overburdened with debt, are driven into debt even for life's necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. But the year of the Lord's favor is coming, when every debt will be forgiven.

Today's wealthiest citizens enjoy a lavish lifestyle far different from the existence of the working poor whose meager wages force them to live from paycheck to paycheck. But the year of the Lord's favor is coming, when injustice will be no more.

Today, many are enslaved by oppressive, unremitting labor, the fruits of which fill the pockets of others. Today, many are enslaved by the bonds of addiction. Today, many are

enslaved by the systems and structures of the evil powers of this world. But the year of the Lord's favor is coming, when the enslaved will all be freed.

We rejoice that the time is coming when all the wrongs, all the wrongs that the powers that be would have us adapt to and adjust to and accommodate to, will be overturned and set right.

The powers and the principalities are strong. But they're no match for our God. The Bible teaches that in the ultimate conflict between the forces of evil and our God, *God wins!* God gets the last word, and it's going to be good.

We rejoice in the victory of our God.

Who does wondrous things for us! And the most wondrous of all is the gift of God's own Son. With great anticipation and expectancy, we look forward to the celebration of his birth.

We rejoice in the advent of this One born in Bethlehem.

This One who is the fulfillment of prophecy, this anointed One who in Nazareth's synagogue reads from the scroll of Isaiah the same words we hear this Sunday: words that reveal his identity and his mission. God's anointed, God's Christ, is the very One who brings good news to the oppressed. Who binds up

the brokenhearted. Who proclaims liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. Who comforts all who mourn.

With the good news we hear and the release we find and the comfort we receive and the delight that is ours, beloved, the question we need to be asking ourselves is not so much *how can we rejoice?* as it is *how can we not rejoice?* For this Jesus who delivers us and redeems us and clothes us with garments of eternal salvation, has promised to return to us in triumph and in glory.

So rejoice, rejoice, O Christian! Lift up your voice and sing! Christ Jesus is your joy. For in him, God comes to you.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.