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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A32
3 Advent (Year B) 8:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m. Online Worship
Sunday 13 December 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
I Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Always Rejoicing Is the Will of God

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God" (1 Thess. 5).

In America we have come to the darkest days of the pandemic. 290,000 have died. Each day we lose almost the same number of people as those who perished in the September 11th terrorist attacks.¹ And yet it's business as usual in so many places even when it is as if ten to fifteen passenger planes were crashing every day. On Thursday someone close to me threatened to take his own life, so many terrible things are happening to those I love. There are many temptations to despair.

And yet the Apostle Paul in the oldest section of the New Testament gives us a simple instruction. He says, "rejoice without ceasing... give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God" (1 Thess. 5). My question today is simple. What does it mean to rejoice and how can this become the center of our life?

As a young child I spent summers with my grandparents in Chelsea, Vermont. I felt so loved in that place. It was like a world of its own, or rather like several worlds. They had an old barn behind their farmhouse that was gradually succumbing to the laws of entropy. It felt like a completely magical place. I remember the comforting musty smell of old hay and dampness. The light came in rays through uneven boards and filtered through the dusty air. It seemed somewhat dangerous. You had to be careful because there were missing stairs up to the hayloft and a few floorboards had rotten through. There were rusted tools, old farm equipment, toys and forgotten objects from another time like an old Victrola record player and other similar treasures.

The barn collapsed long ago and the house was converted into condos, but even if they were the same, I would not be able to return – because I have changed. I am no longer that little boy experiencing life in the shelter of my grandparent's love.

Plato and Aristotle agree that the beginning of all philosophy is wonder. The theologian David Bentley Hart suggests that all thought even, begins in a "moment of unsettling or delighted surprise." He writes, "Not, that is, [in] a simple twinge of curiosity or bafflement regarding some fact out there not yet in one's possession: if anything, it is the sudden awareness that no mere fact can possibly be adequate explanation of the

mystery in which one finds oneself immersed at every moment.”

“It is the astonishing recollection of something one has forgotten only because it is always present: a primordial agitation of the mind and will, an abiding amazement that lies just below the surface of conscious thought...” He goes on saying, “It may be that when we are small children, before we have learned to forget the obvious, we know this wonder in a more constant, innocent, and luminous way, because we are still open to the sheer inexplicable givenness of the world.”²

I think this is what it means in Mark’s words “to receive the Kingdom of God as a child” (Mk. 10:15). As we age the world seems more worn out. That urgent immediacy disappears. The seventeenth century thinker Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) writes, “Die Rose ist ohne warum, sie blühet, weil sie blühet.” “The Rose is without ‘why’ it blooms because it blooms.”

As a child I remember sharing this feeling of mystery and amazement that the world exists and that I felt so at home in it, and trying to explain this to my mother. It is not about what action causes which particular result, but about the way the world can feel like a pure gift. A few weeks later my mom gave me a book explaining the birds and the bees and illustrated with cartoon drawings of a sometimes naked middle aged couple.

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) was one of the teachers at my seminary. He writes that while happiness seems to depend a great deal on our current circumstances, joy lies much deeper. He writes, “Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression or even death – can take that away.”³ Joy and sorrow are not opposites but can co-exist in us at the same time.

The famous civil rights leader and rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once defined faith as primarily a faithfulness to a time when we had faith.⁴ So practically speaking how do we recover this wonder, this rejoicing in the intimacy of God? We cannot become children again but how can we experience the world in this way more often?

This week I found an answer to this question in a long-familiar figure who I suddenly saw in a new way. At Bible Study this week Craig said what a blessing it was that God placed Jesus in a community of people who cared for him and that John and Jesus shared so much in common and must have had a deep friendship. Suddenly John the Baptist didn’t seem so isolated or severe.

John plays a role in all four gospels. Each in some way refers to Isaiah 40:3. "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" Before this year I never noticed the uniqueness of the John in the fourth gospel. In other gospels he is called John the Baptist or "the baptizer" but here he is primarily a witness. He is called a voice who testifies to the truth that a light has entered our world of darkness.

The other gospels have him ordering people to repent or proclaiming a gospel of repentance – but not John. The New Testament scholar Herman Waetjen contrasts the Gospels of Mark and John. He points out that in Mark, John "prepares" the way of the Lord.⁵ This means improving or resurfacing the road bed, eliminating potholes. But the Gospel of John has him "making straight the way of the Lord." This involves eliminating detours and digressions.

Metaphorically it means dispensing with all traditions and practices that qualify or make more distant our relationship to God. The word John uses is one that the ancient witness (Philo and LXX) uses to straighten one's way, heart or a ship. It is related to the word "immediately" and "immediacy." John believes no structures should stand in the way of being in union with God.

When the religious authorities persist in asking if John is the Christ, he uses an emphatic form of Greek to explain that he is not the Messiah. This John reminds us of the importance of humility. Our ego cannot remain at the center of our life if we are going to be people who rejoice.

As Paul writes we can work toward making all of our life a prayer to God. Reaching beyond our ego, offering prayers of thanks to God throughout the day, we return to the child's sense of wonder at the sheer reality and beauty of this world.

A rare illness came close to killing the American poet Christian Wiman (1966-). He says fear is not the reason why there are no atheists in foxholes. He writes, "You don't turn to God in a crisis because you are afraid, at least not primarily. You turn to God because, for once, all that background chatter in your brain, all that pandemonium of blab ceases, and you can hear – and what some of us hear in those instances is a still, small voice."⁶

Imagine what you might hear in this pandemic Advent as we wait for the coming of the one who speaks so tenderly to us from our very first moment to now? I want to close with a poem from Wendell Berry (1934-) called "Remembering that it Happened Once."

"Remembering that it happened once, / We cannot turn away the thought, / As we go out, cold, to our barns / Toward the long night's end, that we / Ourselves are living in the world / It happened in when it first happened,/"

"That we ourselves, opening a stall / (A latch thrown open countless times / Before), might find them breathing there, / Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw, / The mother kneeling over Him, / The husband standing in belief / He scarcely can believe, in light / That lights them from no source we see, / An April morning's light, the air / Around them joyful as a choir. /

"We stand with one hand on the door, / Looking into another world / That is this world, the pale daylight / Coming just as before, our chores / To do, the cattle all awake, / Our own white frozen breath hanging / In front of us: and we are here / As we have never been before, / Sighted as not before, our place / Holy, although, we knew it not."⁷

Brothers and sisters, a light has entered our world of darkness. Let us thank God for our own memories of childlike wonder, that an abiding amazement at beauty lies just below the surface of our conscious thought. Let us thank God for the example of John's humility and the desire for immediate experience of the Holy One, and that one day the chatter that separates us from Christ will be quiet. And let us seek to rejoice always, to give thanks in all circumstances because this is the will of God.

¹ Isabel Togoh, "More People Died From COVID-19 In The U.S. On Wednesday Than From The 9/11 Attacks," *Forbes* 10 December 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/isabeltogoh/2020/12/10/more-people-died-from-covid-19-in-the-us-on-wednesday-than-during-911-attacks/?sh=52989e677136>

² David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013) 87-8.

³ Henri Nouwen quoted in Matt Boulton, "Magnificat: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Advent Week Three," SALT, 8 December 2020). <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2017/12/11/magnificat-lectionary-commentary-for-advent-week-three>

⁴ Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018) 34.

⁵ Herman C. Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 88-90.

⁶ This passage begins with the following: "It has been my own experience that the reason there are no atheists in foxholes, so to speak, is not because of the roar of death and destruction that makes a person terrified, but because when one is truly confronted with one's own end, everything goes icily quiet." Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018) 68-9.

⁷ Wendell Berry, "Remembering that It Happened Once." <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/26/remembering-that-it-happened-once-by-wendell-berry>