

Imagine Joy  
[written in oral form]  
Zephaniah 3:14-17, 20; Philippians 4:4-7  
Advent 3, Year C

December 12, 2021  
Gordon Allaby

The third Sunday of Advent reminds us of joy.  
*The Song, In the Bleak Midwinter*, is an appropriate song to introduce Joy.

English poet, Christian Rossetti, wrote the lyrics in 1872. It was put to music 25 years later.  
The poem is about the gift of love rising from darkness and scarcity.

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We too often associate joy with happiness and cheerfulness.

Joy can come to people in deep despair.  
Anxiety and depression do not hinder joy.  
A person need not be Pollyanna to experience Joy.

Moreover, Joy is much more than a grateful sense of relief.  
I remember feeling that wonderful liberation when I completed my last final of the semester,  
while at seminary.

Relief is grand, but not really joy.

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Joy is profound and it is a holy moment.

We cannot conjure up joy. Joy cannot be constructed, controlled or captured.

Joy tends to come like a beautiful song that touches the soul.  
I think Joy is being enveloped by unfiltered, unqualified love.  
God is love.  
Therefore, Joy is sensing God's presence. Love.

Sometimes joy finds us when we have a family gathering where love abounds.  
Yet, family gatherings, especially during the holidays, may not be so joyous.  
Love may not be so ubiquitous in such a get-together.  
And, I suppose our expectations can distract us from being present in a giving and receiving  
manner.

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Joy is sensing God's presence. It is being imbued with love.

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Both of today's passages invite us to "imagine" Joy.

They begin with a call to rejoice.

Paul adds in Philippians to let our gentleness be known.

We can be gentle when we are comfortable, loving and at peace.

Zephaniah presents the image that God is in our midst.

Paul states God is near.

Remember that: God is present. God is here.

They both paint the delightful concept of not having fears or worries.

There are no threats. Depravity does not exist.

No fear, no worries with Joy. Imagine that!

Zephaniah adds that God will rejoice over us with gladness.

God will renew us in God's love.

The Hebrew word for this love is Not conditional, covenant Love. This love is unconditional, Unrestricted, and absolute.

Then, Zephaniah declares that God will exalt over us with loud singing. That song is Joy.

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Paul finishes his vision with the enticing awareness of being overwhelmed with Peace....that surpasses all understanding.

Joy is beyond understanding.

Zephaniah said it a different way, "God will bring you home."

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Both texts present a vision of Joy.

They say, "This is possible; there is hope."

Yet, as I said, we cannot fabricate, produce joy on our own.

However, we can block the possibility. We can sabotage joy.

Some barriers are: being too busy and distracted.

Constantly looking at a screen will block joy.

Obsessing about perceived threats, worrying about "what if", and unreasonable expectations can hinder joy.

Also, so can feeling unworthy, .... Unlovable.

Some people think they are Not worthy of love, and it is shameful to be taught that. Very sad.....and wrong.

Recall both writers said that God is present with us.

God is love.

I really do not think that God would hang around anybody who God does not love.

You and I are loved by God. God is present with us with unqualified love. We do not deserve or earn it.

Love is pure and generous, especially divine love.

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We can not conjure up joy, but we Can prepare ourselves to be receptive of Joy.

Paul encouraged the reader to release needs and burdens to God; to let God take care of such things.

Can we imagine that?

We can remove distractions, and we can be expecting and open to God's presence.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century actor and singer Pearl Bailey once said, "People see God every day; they just don't recognize God."

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I remember a dark night while living out in the Saskatchewan countryside. I was not feeling content.

I was worrying about stuff.

I was up alone, and I suddenly had the desire to go outside.

There was very little light pollution where I lived.

The stars were brilliant, crystal clear. The milky way contained layers and layers of visible stars & planets.

The display was mesmerizing.

It was amazing, then all of a sudden, the sky lit up in the north, then danced south, filling the entire heavens with the Aura Borealis.

That show of northern lights was the most impressive I have ever seen. There were all kinds of colours, red, blue, yellow and more.

I was captivated in awe.....and I was filled with JOY.

The joy was so wonderfully intense that it rendered tears.

Then, I knew I had to share this. I rushed into the house and woke up Leslie and Katherine so they could experience what was happening.

Joy is like that—joy inspires sharing.

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Do pristine nights and northern lights create joy?

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NOT at all.

That wonderful natural display did not cause my joy.

What it did do was capture my attention.  
In those moments, nothing else mattered. I was fully present.  
This is sometimes called mindfulness.

There was no distraction for me, so I could then experience the presence of God. Love was present. Joy.

All my focus was on being present, and God was with me.  
God is always with us.

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Imagine you are surrounded by gentle, loving people.  
You are.  
Imagine that you are breathing, nice deep breaths.

Imagine that nothing is expected from you.  
You have no threats.  
Imagine not having any fears and worries.

Imagine no exams, no grades, no responsibilities.  
At this moment, there are none.

Imagine all is well with your children.  
Imagine your parents as loving and understanding.

Imagine justice prevailing and there is world peace.  
Imagine good health and vitality.

Imagine God being present, right now.

Imagine that a wonderful, serendipitous moment will arrive.

Imagine a 13-year-old boy riding his bike home.  
Okay, the boy is me.

I was in a big hurry to get home because my bowls were not content. I needed to go badly.  
I quickly discerned that I was Not going to make it home.  
Fortunately, there was a corner gas station nearby.

In those days, gas station washrooms were not inside. They were located on the side of the building, and back then, they were left unlocked for anyone to use them.

With haste, I parked my bike, went inside, and locked the door.  
Those old washrooms were small, yet tall, with a window at the top.  
The acoustics were fantastic, better than most washrooms.

So, I could not help but sing. Even though it was mid-summer, I sang my favourite Christmas carol—O Holy Night.

I sang it with great vigor. I loved that song and knew every word.

Unbeknown to me, the window at the top was slanted open. It effectively projected sound outside.

Outside, over 30 people had gathered around. Some were curious about the attraction, and pulled over and stood by their cars.

When I opened the door, everyone revealed their delight and joy with applause and cheering.

Needless to say, I had not expected that and I was very embarrassed. I leaped on my bike and sped home.

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For a few minutes, that audience was solely focused on a young boy singing, “Fall on your knees, oh hear the angels sing.”

For a moment, there were no worries and concerns.

And, more than likely, they felt the touch of God’s love swirling all around.

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I certainly did NOT feel joy.

That’s another thing about joy: it is NOT about me and my needs. Far from it.

Joy / the awareness of God’s presence / God’s love can blossom when we release our inward focus.

And, joy motivates us to share.

Let us sing our next song for each other, Joy to the World.

We CAN help bring joy to others.

Elie Wiesel said, “An act of love may tip the balance.”

Joy to the world.