

Live into Joy
Psalm 98
John 15:1-17

“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord”
The Gospel according to Luke.

Thus, the angels announce the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, telling them and the world that they bring “good news of great joy.” Jesus’ birth is announced with joy.

Joy is today’s Advent word, and it is clear from the beginning that Jesus was to bring joy to the people. It is also clear throughout the Bible that God was and is associated with joy. Did you know that in the NRSV translation of the Bible the word “joy” is used over 250 times? The word “rejoice” is used over 200 times, and the word “joyous” is used at least 7 times? Joy is a concept to be associated with the Triune God!

So, let’s think about that word, “joy” for a moment. The standard dictionary definition is “a *feeling of pleasure or great happiness.*” But a more Biblical understanding of that word carries a deeper meaning. Joy is about carrying within oneself an inner contentment and satisfaction that comes not as a result of outside circumstances but as a choice, because of one’s relationship with God. In fact, in the Epistle of James we read:

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance complete its work, so that you may be complete and whole, lacking in nothing.”

How can that be? —one might ask. How can I be joyful if my whole life has gone to heck in a handbasket around me? Could you experience joy in an extreme circumstance—like being in a POW camp? And the answer to those kinds of questions is yes, as with hope, because we know and have faith that God is in

charge, that God is good, and that eventually, in God's time, all will be well. Is it easy? Well, God never promised it would be easy. But the key point is this. Joy is a choice.

Here is another interesting thought. Joy is an act of resistance. Let that sink in for a moment.

The phrase "joy is an act of resistance" is a line out of a poem by black poet Toi Derricotte, and that concept has taken off like joyous fire. The phrase conveys the idea that joy is a powerful force that can give people strength. It can be a rallying point in a situation which previously seemed futile. Joy is, so to speak, a superpower.

The author Austin Channing Brown noted how this phrase impacted black women. She writes.

"The poet Toi Derricotte revolutionized Black feminism with one line in a poem, "joy is an act of resistance." With that one line, she gave Black women an opportunity to rethink the work of racial justice. Finally we were given permission not to just be mules for the work of racial justice- carrying a kicking and screaming country into a better future. We were given permission to also see our joy as defying white supremacy. And when we stop to think about this one beautiful sentence, it unlocks a world of truthfulness. Historically, America has both been completely uninterested in the joyfulness, the happiness of Black women and has actively worked to villainize our joy. Our dancing. Our hair. Our laughter. Our desire for luxury and access and opportunity. Our sexuality. Our dress and jewelry. Our jokes and conversation. Our songs. Black girls and Black women alike have our joy misconstrued as disrespectful, arrogant, or perpetually inappropriate. Our joy is suspicious. And what right have we to joy when we have so much work to do? Ms. Derricotte, with the wonder that only poetry can unearth, gives an answer. We aren't just pursuing racial justice when we are organizing or voting or protesting or speechmaking or volunteering or working... we are also pursuing justice when we indulge in joy."

True words here. But think about it. Joy is an act of resistance in any situation where things are dark. In any situation where one group of people is oppressing another, what those people want is for the other group is for them to give up, to

lose hope, to feel despair, to stop trying. But what if the oppressed people opt for joy instead? What if, no matter the circumstances, the oppressed group is full of “contentment and satisfaction,” despite the evils being perpetrated upon them? The oppressors don’t know what to do with them then! Joy is an act of resistance, and it is our superpower. Remember the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the Philippians:

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it.^[1] ¹¹ Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

And so, though it might seem counter intuitive, it might seem wrong to be joyful when others clearly aren’t, that is not the case. So be joyful in your own lives. Do whatever you can to create joy in this world, to give joy to others. Use your superpower!

In a moment we will be singing Joy to the World, a hymn which, while associated with Christmas, is really taken out of Psalm 98, which you heard earlier today. But this hymn sums it up well.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come
Joy to the world, the Savior reigns

And now my naughty brain is singing another song. —Joy to the world, all the boys and girls. Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea. Joy to you and me. (Joy to the World, 3 Dog night)

God wants us to be joyful. Go and live into joy. Amen.