

## *Awaiting the Unexpected: Brokenhearted Joy<sup>i</sup>*

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John 1: 6 – 8, 19 – 28

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The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 13, 2020

### I.

The third Sunday of Advent, this year an Advent in the Wild.  
We've been awaiting the unexpected by lighting purples candles.  
The candle of desperate hope. The candle of disturbing peace.  
Today the candle is a bit different.  
It's pink, suggesting a different mood, not so penitential.  
Traditionally, this is "Gaudete" Sunday, a Sunday that can't help but break the pattern of somber preparation.  
The word of the day is Joy, which is what Gaudete means in Latin.  
And the story most often associated with today is the story of the Annunciation.  
As Luke tell is, the angel Gabriel visits a teenager named Miriam, also known as Mary, and his greeting to her is a word that means Joy.<sup>ii</sup>  
That meeting was an experience that changed Miriam's, life.  
And this has been a year that has changed all of our lives, a year unlike any other.  
It is now Advent in the year 2020 and we are given the word "Joy" again.  
And we are asked to ponder what "Joy" means for us given the realities on the ground.

### II.

Alas, our text for today is not the story of the Annunciation, but another rendering of the story of John the Baptist, this time from the Gospel of John.  
Last week, we pondered the disturbing peace that is shared in the Sacrament of Baptism inaugurated by John.  
This week, I want to highlight something else about John.  
John is not just some random guy that decided on his own to go out into the desert and start baptizing people.  
As John stands in the flowing waters of the Jordan, he also stands in the flow of a long stream of prophets sent to show Israel the way back to God by way of justice.  
The prophets are called by God to deliver God's inconvenient truth, and as such, they are resisted by those with much to lose.  
"Who are you?" John is asked by the authorities.  
Are you the Messiah? No.

Are you Elijah? No.

Are you the prophet, a reincarnation of Moses or Jeremiah? No.

Then who are you?

John replies, "I'm the one crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way."

John didn't compose those words on the spot.

They are the words of the prophet Isaiah.

In quoting Isaiah, John is placing himself within a tradition, the tradition of the prophets.

## II.

The Bible is not a univocal book.

It is a library of sacred stories that includes many, many voices.

Some modern writers suggest that the Bible itself hosts a contest between voices, two voices in particular.

Wes Howard-Brook says that the contest is between a religion of creation and a religion of empire.<sup>iii</sup>

For Howard-Brook, the prophets are on the side of creation, God's good gift that must be stewarded with care and shared with generosity.

Delores Williams says the contest is between patriarchal voices seeking domination and voices from the margins.<sup>iv</sup>

For Williams, prophetic voices include those of marginalized women, including Hagar, who is the only person in scripture who has the audacity to name God. She names God El Roi, "the one who sees."

My one-time professor, Cornel West, makes a distinction between Prophetic Christianity and what he calls Constantinian Christianity.<sup>v</sup>

Named after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Roman Emperor who brought Christianity under the protection of the Roman Empire, Constantinian Christianity uses Christianity to validate the violent and coercive power of empire, while prophetic Christianity subverts empire by elevating love and justice, and centering marginalized voices.

## III.

I hope I don't have to spend too much time convincing you that prophetic Christianity is the tradition embodied by Jesus and the early church, although we are always tempted to practice Constantinian Christianity instead.

I hope it's not controversial to say that John the Baptist, standing in the long line of Israel's prophets, is preparing a way of justice and love that does not square with the Roman Empire of his time or the American empire of our own time.

While prophets like John are often abrasive and uncompromising, I want to suggest that they nonetheless embody something called “prophetic joy.”

Prophetic joy springs from a deep sense of the goodness of God, blessedness of God’s creation, and the dignity of all people.

But prophetic joy is brokenhearted joy, joy that persists even when the powers of Empire seem to have the upper hand.

Prophetic, brokenhearted joy is the fountain from which John’s call to repent emerges. After all, why repent unless there is a better, more beautiful and worthy world on offer, a world that is already evident within?

For those with ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts to feel, examples of prophetic, brokenhearted joy of joy are everywhere.

Consider aja monet’s poem that we witnessed earlier in this worship.<sup>vi</sup>

The joy, the “black joy” she evokes is less a feeling and an active force.

She observes this joy showing up in everyday people and places, little glimmers of life that go largely unnoticed but that are the stuff that makes life livable and interesting and beautiful and holy.

And “black joy,” I think, is joy that resists and subverts and mocks joyless “white supremacy culture,” which is another name for the Empire in which we live.

Another example of prophetic, brokenhearted joy:

Native American biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer teaches that, “In some native languages, the term for plants translates to ‘those who take care of us.’”<sup>vii</sup>

Kimmerer observes that the way we restore our relationship with nature, is to find our joy in it, for we will only fight to save what we love.

And if plants take care of us, why shouldn’t we take care of them?

Or another example of prophetic, brokenhearted joy:

Activist and drag performer Miss Peppermint, in a recent interview, describes the joy she experiences as a transgender person.<sup>viii</sup>

She founded the Black Queer Town Hall as a venue to celebrate black queer joy.

Celebrating gender expressions in all their diversity and humor and beauty is a prophetic act within an empire that wants to define gender in narrow, confining, life-constricting ways.

Why not define gender broadly as an act of joy?

Or another example of prophetic, brokenhearted joy:

In their book called "The Book of Joy," Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama describe the joy of their friendship as a South African Anglican Christian Bishop and a Tibetan Buddhist Lama.<sup>ix</sup>

In the midst of apartheid and exile, these two have shared brokenhearted joy in each other's presence and even over long periods of absence.

In the book, the two of them agree that joy cannot be manufactured, cannot be forced.

"It's like a flower," Tutu says, "You open, you blossom... because of other people."

"When you show love to others," the Dalai Lama adds, "you have a deep joy that you can get in no other way."

Joy, it seems, is always a shared experience, always a gift, always the fruit of relationship.

Finally, one more example:

I've been reading the diaries of Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman in her 20's living in Amsterdam at the same time as Anne Frank.<sup>x</sup>

I'm finding kindred spirit in Etty who finds joy and delight in tiny things while war and the threat of deportation swells around her.

She finds joy in the faces of her friends, in a small cup of coffee, in the movement of her hand across the page as she writes by candlelight.

Etty refused to hate the German soldiers, even prayed for them.

She resolved to love life instead, and prayed to God to provide the discipline and strength to carry on.

Her joy saved her in the end.

While she died at Auschwitz, her legacy of love survives still.

#### IV.

Prophetic, brokenhearted joy is experienced in the midst of the disappointments and sufferings of the world.

It is a gift found within and shared between people.

Those who were drawn to John the Baptist did not seek him out because he berated them, but because he shared a joyful prophetic vision of a just world, a vision he inherited from a long line of prophets.

This same prophetic tradition is the tradition into which Jesus himself was baptized.

Jesus inherited this brokenhearted joy, which really is God's brokenhearted joy.

God's heart is broken open for all God's people.

That's the kind of God that God is.

And when we tap into God's life within us, we tap into that same joy.

Where are you finding it these days?

Where does your joy come from that endures, resists, and even transforms reality on the ground?

The other day I was with my 15-year-old son, Marin, and I was overcome by a sense of rage, not at him, but for him.

These are the days he's supposed to be making his high school memories, and yet he's stuck at home going to class on a computer and then having to hang out with his parents all evening.

And then I realized that underneath the rage was a joy that I have a son, and that this is who he is, and this is his life, and that every day with him is a gift.

"Who are you?" they asked John the Baptist.

"A voice crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way!"

I think the way of which the Baptist spoke is the way of brokenhearted joy.

And as aja monet said, "Joy, real joy, is justice." Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Thank you to Sharon Fennema who composed our congregation's 2020 Advent liturgies, including our weekly themes.

<sup>ii</sup> Insight drawn from "Strange New World" podcast for the 3<sup>rd</sup> week in Advent, 2020.

<sup>iii</sup> "Come Out, My People," Wes Howard-Brook

<sup>iv</sup> "Sisters in the Wilderness," Delores Williams

<sup>v</sup> "Democracy Matters," Cornel West

<sup>vi</sup> "Black Joy," aja monet

<sup>vii</sup> Quote found via internet search. Kimmerer's most recent book is called "Braiding Sweetgrass"

<sup>viii</sup> Miss Peppermint interview on the "Tight Rope" podcast with Tricia Rose and Cornel West

<sup>ix</sup> "The Book of Joy," Dalai Lama & Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams

<sup>x</sup> "An Interrupted Life," Etty Hillesum