

I Believe in God: Ode to Joy

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Today's first reading comes from Isaiah chapter 57 verses 14 through 19. And it will be said, build up, build up, prepare the road, remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.

For this is what the high and exalted one says, he who lives forever, whose name is holy. I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit.

To revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry. For then they would faint away because of me, the very people I have created.

I was enraged by their sinful greed. I punished them and hid my face in anger. Yet they kept on in their willful ways. I have seen their ways, but I will heal them.

I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners, creating praise on their lips. Peace, peace to those far and near, says the Lord, and I will heal them.

[1 : 1 5] The second reading comes from Luke chapter 1 verses 26 through 56. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever.

His kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the powers of the Most High will overshadow you.

[2 : 3 0] So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, and she who has said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

For no word from God will ever fail. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her.

At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leapt in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a loud voice she exclaimed, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leapt for joy. Blessed is she who has believed the word that the Lord would fulfill his promise to her.

[3 : 41] And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me.

Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm.

He has scattered those who are proud in their innermost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, and then returned home.

This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me, please? Gracious and loving God, we're at a time where we're waiting for your Son to come to us during the time of Advent.

[5 : 00] We ask that you fill our hearts with joy this day, which only you can give. Remind each of us of that good news for everyone.

God, we ask that you speak to us, that you speak to our listening, and speak to our soul's deep understanding. Amen. So it's the third Sunday of Advent, and we've walked with hope symbolized by the first candle on the Advent wreath.

It represents the anticipation and the longing for the Messiah, tracking all the way back to the Old Testament prophecies, promising the coming of a Savior.

The hope extends beyond historical anticipation to the hope Christians hold today, anticipating Christ's second coming, and instills in us a sense of assurance, promising that God fulfills his promises despite challenges, and a sparkling light of hope amidst the darkness.

We turned to love. Love is moving and growing in the womb as the second candle mirrored God's ultimate act of love by sending his Son into the world, a manifestation of divine love and grace, and it reminds us of the sacrificial love that God has.

[6 : 30] Love becomes a beacon guiding each of us towards understanding and embodying Christ's love in our interactions, fostering compassion, empathy, and unity.

And now this week, joy. Joy. Joy erupts from the depths of our soul, leaping from the womb of one who was called barren.

And we hear Mary's song, Mary's song of justice. Favor is upon the lonely. It's almost time. God has chosen the vehicle to deliver God's Son to the world.

And we are reminded that God will use anybody, anybody, to bring love into the world. That union of hope, love, and joy serves as a spiritual roadmap, guiding us towards a deeper understanding of Christ's significance in our lives.

It prepares our hearts to welcome the birth of Jesus, not just as a historical event, but a transformational encounter with the divine Christ.

[7 : 43] A revelation of God's enduring love and the fulfillment of the long-awaited promise of redemption. Through the anticipation and preparation, Advent becomes a time for us to renew our faith, to strengthen our devotion, and align our hearts with that true meaning of Christmas.

The prophet Isaiah said, The Holy One will refresh the humble and give new courage to those with repentant hearts. A contrite heart is joyful in and with defiance, showing those works of salvation, healing deliverance from chains on humanity's minds, compassion, and souls.

A repentant heart is seen as one's actions. Hope leads believers to trust in those promises of God. Love prompts us to reflect on Christ's selfless sacrifice, and joy arises from the assurance of God's faithfulness and the imminent arrival of our Savior.

So where do you find joy? When do you find it? Think about your day-to-day activities. Where do you find that joy?

Not happiness, but joy. Happiness is fleeting. Happiness is often transient, and it's dependent on those external circumstances.

[9 : 16] Achieving a goal, experiencing a pleasant moment, or gaining something that we want. Happiness is short-lived, and it fluctuates in different situations.

But joy is enduring, especially at this time of year, the Christmas season, trying to find happiness and joy in things.

And often we confuse joy and happiness. We see things for sale, and things are nice, but they don't bring you that joy, that deeper, more enduring, profound sense of contentment, peace, and gratitude that persists during challenging times.

Joy is what gets you through when times are tough and allows you to thrive even during adversity and hardship. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit.

It's that manifestation of God's presence within each and every one of us. It's more than a fleeting emotion. It's a profound state that acknowledges God's sovereignty, grace, and faithfulness.

[10 : 32] In our world, that's often overshadowed by doubt and uncertainty, our belief becomes the anthem of joy singing to the world.

It echoes through the corridors of our hearts and guides us towards hope and fulfillment. Joy emerges from a deep relationship with God, accepting his love and provision, and it transcends all of our circumstances, rooted in the eternal hope found in Christ.

So where do you find your joy? Where do you find that deep, enduring feeling? Maybe you find that joy in the people that you love.

Maybe you find it in the people that you meet. Perhaps you find that joy doing the work of God's kingdom, even when it's at its most trying.

Many find deep, lasting joy in their faith and spiritual practices. It comes from that connection, that sense of a connection with God, a feeling of purpose and the assurance of divine love and grace.

[11 : 49] Being grateful for what you have and finding contentment in the present moment can bring about that sense of joy. Joy, it's appreciating the simple things in life and finding beauty in those everyday moments.

I'm often surprised by joy when I least expect it. And I find great joy in music. The joy that takes me beyond myself to a greater whole and it lifts me up to something beyond just myself, to God.

It lets my soul sing and that joy sustains me even during the most challenging times. Music has that power to give us joy, especially in our times of trials.

We heard Mary's song, resilient and insistent. She found joy in the good news that God had given her this task, but she knew it wouldn't be easy.

And I can't imagine that Mary's life was smooth after that angel Gabriel's announcement. Her magnificent song of God's justice and God's will and his intent for the world.

[13 : 07] We can't gloss over the reality that she's a young, pregnant woman. She has no husband. She's betrothed, but not married. We romanticize it and pretty it up in our songs and in our art and in our Christmas cards.

But when we get to see Mary's pregnancy with hindsight, we don't live those everyday realities with her being unmarried and pregnant, even if it was God's own son.

But during these trying circumstances, Mary sang. She's incredibly brave and she thrives despite or maybe because of the burden of love that she carries.

And yes, Mary knows what this means and she sings about it. She sings a revolution, a reversal of the way that things were of the time.

Mary sings to an end of business of usual. She sings God's intent for the people of the world. She sings what this child she is carrying is going to do.

[14 : 16] He's going to change life as they know it. Emmanuel is coming to do God's will and there's joy for so many in those words.

But there's also opposition. Not everyone wants their world abandoned. Not everyone wants justice. Not everyone wants the poor to be lifted up and fed and the rich to go empty-handed.

Especially the rich. The powerful are too, not too crazy about being taken from their power and not everyone will be happy with the love of God and God's way of doing things.

Mary sings about the transformation of the world. She carried that love of God. She willingly accepted the collateral damage of bearing goodness in a time and place where doing so would prove so difficult and so hard.

She carried God's love and joy within her and she sang. And I want you to hear her song again. She says, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

[15 : 34] For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. For now on all generations will call me blessed. For the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their innermost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones. He has lifted up the humble and has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away.

He has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever just as he promised our ancestors.

There always seems to be collateral damage of bearing goodness in times and places. It's difficult because some people will oppose goodness even today.

[16 : 38] There's a resistance for some reason to God's goodness. God's intent for justice. God's compassion for God's way of doing things in the world.

God's grace but God calls us all to sing despite of it and to do it with joy. Mary carried Jesus and considered that a beautiful immeasurable blessing.

You can hold Jesus in your heart in your mind and in your life and by doing so you can know the kind of joy that Mary sang about. The miracle in your life is the same miracle that was present in Jesus' life, in Mary's life and that miracle is Jesus and he wants to bring that joy, that relationship into your life.

Mary's song exalts God for his faithfulness, for his mercy and justice. It celebrates God's favor towards the humble and oppressed and it acknowledges God's promises.

So this sermon series had songs that accompanied it and the song that accompanied the material for this week is Beethoven's Ode to Joy.

[17 : 55] Beethoven wrote this in 1824 near the end of his life. He had seemingly little to be thankful for at least on the surface but he wrote an anthem of such joy that it's still sung worldwide.

It transcends suffering and lifts us into beauty beyond ourselves. When Beethoven wrote this he was deaf, he was sick, he was alienated from almost everyone and he had not found that lasting love that he desired or the family that he so wanted but he still wrote this magnificent symphony filled with joy, that deep sustaining joy within him that allowed him to do this.

And again, joy is not the same as happiness. We can be truly miserable and find joy. Joy is that deep human feeling even amid hardship, oppression, poverty.

We can experience joy even in our sorrow. Joy is the love that God breathes through us. It's the lasting hope that God gives us.

Joy is what connects us to the eternal and not just the mortal. Friday night I was invited by a friend to go to a Christmas concert in Lockport and at the end of the concert there was a sing-along.

[19 : 27] And even though we were there as individual people, we were part of something bigger than ourselves. Hearts were filled and the music and our voices combined and lifted up to the eternal.

Music has that power whether we're listening or we're singing. Mary sang and as she sang she became part of something bigger than herself.

She became part of God's intent for the world in individual lives, various hardships, health issues, financial struggles, emotional turmoil.

All of these things can overshadow our joy as I'm sure it did Mary's. That message of enduring joy encourages each of us to seek resilience amid adversity.

encouraging practices like mindfulness, gratitude, and finding those faith-based reflections can help us find joy during all of our personal struggles.

[20 : 33] We can discover inner joy that transcends different circumstances by focusing on small amounts of gratitude, embracing the support of our community, and nurturing our own spiritual well-being.

Finding enduring joy amidst the challenges in our lives involves focusing on blessings no matter how small, and it fosters a sense of appreciation and contentment in each of us.

Fostering our spiritual well-being may be seeking solace in prayer or meditation. Those things can provide inner strength and resilience.

We can create spaces for mutual support, empathy, and understanding within our communities to help all of us navigate hardships collectively.

We can foster that sense of belonging and a shared joy. Engaging in acts of kindness, service, and compassion towards others brings joy to not only the recipients, but it generates a sense of fulfillment and purpose in us.

[21 : 45] so when people sing Beethoven's Ode to Joy in times of threat, in times of fear, or in times of sorrow, they are part of something that's so much bigger than themselves.

There's a beautiful documentary called Following the Ninth, and it shows the global impact that it's had and continues to have. They follow it as an anthem of liberation and hope at Tiananmen Square.

The students played Ode to Joy over loudspeakers as the army came to crush their struggle for freedom. In Chile, women living under the Pinochet dictatorship sang the song at torture prisons where the men inside took hope when they heard their voices.

And as the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, it collapsed to the sound of Leonard Bernstein's conducting Beethoven's Ninth, Ode to Joy.

In Japan, each December, they commemorate the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in 2011 with the singing of Ode to Joy.

[22 : 59] It's not a turning away from sorrow or ignoring it. It's embracing and lifting ourselves up from that misery into something eternal, something beyond ourselves.

The concept of joy doesn't dismiss or ignore suffering. Instead, it stands as a testament to God's presence even amidst trials. It's a paradox that simultaneously experience of hardship and joy.

The concept echoes the biblical narrative where individuals encountered God's presence and found that joy despite all of the trouble.

It's about finding comfort in the assurance of God's faithfulness even in turbulent times. In our reading from Isaiah today, the exiles are returning to Babylon from Judah.

And it's not what they had hoped for. There's so much work for them to do. Isaiah turns to words about rebuilding which will take a long time. God's people still have rebuilding to do here and now which will take an even longer time.

[24 : 13] We have work that we're called to do and the same words that Mary lifted up in that beautiful song. We have our own song to say despite everything.

Despite the fears, the sorrow and the uncertainty of our times and our places. In our lives, we often face that turbulence, that uncertainty and that distress.

There are times where we can't hear what God is saying or if we're not even sure if he's there. But Isaiah's words remind us that God remains our source of solace and restoration.

He's there even when he's silent. In our lowest moments, God invites us to dwell in his presence, promising peace and healing to those who seek him sincerely.

He stands ready to guide us, to mend our wounds and to offer solace. He calls us back to himself in a love relationship that's full of joy.

[25 : 18] Sometimes we're required to dig deep to find God's joy within ourselves, but God will supply it. We can open ourselves to God to experience this with each other and with other people because opening ourselves to a different perspective can bring that sense of hope and despair.

Opening ourselves to the views of others can shift our fear to compassion and turn our swords into plows. Salvation is near, says the scripture.

When we allow God to work in us and through us, when we say yes just as Mary did, then joy enters. Joy is not about denying suffering.

It's not about denying the reality that we are all living through, but embracing the depths of all of life's emotions. It allows us to feel the heights and the depths of joy that's possible when we understand suffering.

Friends, this is where we find our joy each and every day, not just at Christmas. We see our joy in trusting God in his word and trusting God to intervene in our lives.

[26 : 38] That joy is interconnected with our redemption. That message of salvation and the hope of eternity bring forth joy that surpasses worldly understanding.

The realization that God's redemptive work in Christ and the transformation it brings to our lives evoke that profound joy, a joy that radiates from the assurance of God's grace and forgiveness.

And as we reflect on these scriptures and the true meaning of joy, may we echo Mary's song of praise, magnifying the Lord for his faithfulness.

Let us hold on to the promise of restoration and joy from believing in God. Let us embrace the ode to joy of believing in God's promises.

Let our hearts resonate with the song of faith and hope just as Isaiah envisioned restoration and Mary's saying of God's faithfulness. May our lives become an expression of joy rooted in unwavering belief, a belief that sustains us through every season, echoing the unshakable faith of all of those who went before us.

[27 : 56] Amen. Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of faith and the joy that comes from believing in you. Help us to embody the heart and humility and trust of Mary and find joy and solace in your presence, especially in times of uncertainty.

May our lives be a testament to your faithfulness and joy. In your name we pray. Amen. So we have a few announcements before we end this service.

This Thursday is our blue Christmas service, so if you are not feeling like Christmas, if you're not feeling that joy in your hearts, we invite you to come. That's at 630 on Thursday.

Next Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Advent, Christmas Eve, we will have only a nine o'clock service. There will not be one at 11. And then the services in the evening for Christmas Eve will be at 7 and 11.

There is a sign-up sheet in the back for our small groups that is introduction, understanding the Bible, discovering your gifts and calling, and developing your prayer and devotional life, and our Advent Bible studies on Thursday.

[29 : 18] So I invite you to go and find that joy, find that peace, find that hope and that love, and carry it out to the world each and every day.

So may you go with all of the hope, all of the joy, all of the love of Christ that's in your hearts.