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Psalm 126, Luke 2:8-20
Advent of Joy

Reading the Huffington Post Online recently, I came across an article by certified health coach, Karen Ann Kennedy, entitled, "15 Things to Help You Be Happier and Healthier in 2015."

They are: Drink more water, eat more vegetables, get enough sleep, get out in nature, cut out the junk, get some exercise, get a checkup, green your routine, volunteer, get real, have some fun, stop being so hard on yourself, stretch yourself, skip the soda and practice gratitude.

That's a good light-hearted and worthwhile list. I found another that compliments this list. It appeared on the World Observer Online site and called, "13 Way to Be Happier."

They are: Let go of your complaining, let go of having to always be right, let go of any self-defeating ideas, let go of your fears, let go of unhealthy attachments, let go of making criticism, let go of blaming, let go of trying to impress other people, let go of your excuses, let go of trying to always control, let go of dwelling on the past, let go of resisting change and let go of living life to other people's expectations.

Both lists have accompanying narratives. If anyone would like me to email you the lists with the brief narratives, please let me know after the service. It is good to work on happiness and not to worry and be happy as Bobby McFerrin sings.

The third Advent Sunday today is regarded as the Advent of Joy, indicated in church by a rose-colored Advent candle and on the bulletin cover. Joy is not happiness. I'll explain later. As most of us know, I have emphasized the cover themes in my Advent sermons. So far, I have spoken about hope and peace.

"Joy" is integral to the Christmas story. The arrival of the baby Jesus, and all babies for that matter, is an occasion for joy. There is joy in the arrival of Jesus because he brings salvation to all the earth and particularly to those who believe in him. Christians are guaranteed joy precisely because we believe in Jesus.

Matthew tells us that the three wise men followed a star to the place of Jesus' birth. This child, it was told them, would be the new King of Israel and when the star stopped, indicting the place, they were overwhelmed with joy.

When the two pregnant mothers, Mary (of Jesus) and Elizabeth (of John) meet, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Mary's response is known as "The Magnificat." She says, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

We read the wonderful words of the angel to the shepherds in the field, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

"Joy to the world, the lord has come..." we sing and we shall do so after the sermon. The mention of all this joy makes me joyful. But what exactly is joy? I asked family and friends around the dinner table this question and I received answers like, "joy is exuberant happiness," "it's the 'wow' of happiness."

"The 'wow' of happiness" gets close to a definition of joy. One imagines the wise men gazing at their astral phenomenon and saying, "wow" and then feeling joy. One can see the shepherds saying, "wow" and then rushing joyfully on to see the baby Jesus.

Frederick Buechner writes in his book, *Wishful Thinking*, "In the Gospel of John, Jesus sums up pretty much everything by saying, 'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full' (John 15:11). He said it at the supper that he knew was the last one at which he would eat.

"Happiness turns up more or less where you'd expect it to—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it."

The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary states that, "Joy is often equated with happiness, but the two are quite distinct. Happiness depends largely upon happenings: good health, congenial company, pleasant surroundings, etc. Happiness and unhappiness do not exist together; but joy and sorrow can and do.

"Our Lord was 'a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53:3) but 'for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.'" (Hebrews 12:2).

According to Buechner, Jesus knows that his life will be taken from him *and* he knows that there would be a resurrection and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would enliven his disciples in a new way and reverberate down the centuries and touch our lives. That's fullness of joy in spite of his sorrow and anticipated grief.

We experience joy when our lives reflect the Christmas themes of hope, peace, love and grace. I mentioned throughout my Advent sermons that the idea for communicating the Advent themes came recently to me in the middle of the night when I was in hospital attached to an IV after hernia repair surgery. I was hopeful of a good recovery, I felt the peace of God, I felt the love of God in Suellen and you all, I knew God's grace in my faith, and I experienced joy.

We saw in the beginning of this sermon, modes of acquiring happiness. These are excellent, God wants us to be happy, and God gives us many ways to achieve happiness. We do it on our own and with those around us. Joy on the other hand is the grace and gift of God in Christ. Jesus comes into the world and we are joyful. We embrace Jesus in our lives and find joy.

Joy happens when our Christian life is in full swing in worship, personal prayer (think of the prayers of Jesus in good and bad times), in communal gatherings, in advocacy for peace and justice, and in service.

We are joyful when we live in God. We are joyful even through tough times. Paul's letter to the Philippians, written under circumstances of severe apostolic suffering, is also the most joyous of all his letters. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's meditation on the Psalms, he puts joy in the place of bitterness and pain. Although in prison, his connection to God in Christ brings him joy.

French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer and Christian philosopher, Blaise Pascal, describes a central experience in his life by writing, "From about half past ten in the evening to about half an hour after midnight. Fire... Absolute certainty: Beyond reason. Joy. Peace. Forgetfulness of the world and everything but God... Joy! joy! joy!" (Harvey Seifert, *Explorations in Meditation and Contemplation*, p. 73). That's a mystical experience and it also describes the joy we have in Christ.

Joy is hard to pin down. It comes to us in a deep and abiding way during Advent and Christmas and throughout the year when our lives are connected to God in Christ. Amen.