

Advent Home Study:

Joy in the Gospels

Third Sunday of Advent



“Then there appeared to Zechariah an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.’”

-Luke 1:11-15a

Gladness

Our third week of Advent focuses on the spirituality of joy. Sometimes we take Jesus so seriously that we forget that joy is also at the heart of our tradition. In the New Testament, the word for “joy” comes from the same root as the word for “grace.” So, joy means something like, “rejoicing in the grace of God” or, put another way, joy is the feeling we get when we experience God’s grace. Zechariah met an angel and he was so scared. But the angel came to tell him about the child his wife would bear – John the Baptist. In the face of what might have been the greatest fear of Zechariah’s life, the angel says, “do not be afraid... You will have joy and gladness.” This promised gladness is a rejoicing, an exulting, an overwhelming joy (in contrast to the overwhelming fear). The word for gladness is literally one who feels so much joy that they spontaneously jump up in celebration. So, let your heart leap, let your spirit be light, and be glad in the coming messiah.

Monday

“So Jesus told them this parable: ‘Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

-Luke 15:3-7



Repentance

Repentance might not be your first go-to topic when you think about joy, but God’s willingness to forgive us when we go astray and ask for forgiveness is one of the surest ways that we can experience God’s grace. More than that, we learn in this passage that there is joy in heaven when we repent – angels, seraphim, cherubim, all the heavenly host jumping for joy! Central to this concept of repentance is that we come to understand differently. After we have sinned, our thoughts and our hearts consider what we have said or done. We have second thoughts that lead us to seek mercy and a new way of thinking and being. This twinge of regret is transformed into making amends, righting wrongs, mending fences, and a return to joy in God’s loving guidance. Let us open our hearts to God’s healing and restoration.

Tuesday

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

-Matthew 13:44



Treasure

Did you ever notice how deep, profound joy can make people look kinda nuts? They're laughing and crying, leaping up randomly, forming half sentences that make no sense! I guess finding profound spiritual joy can look crazy to other people, too. Jesus tells us this super short parable about the kingdom of heaven. Not everyone can see the treasure that's there or what it means for humanity. But the one who sees? In their joy, they will sell everything, do anything to be a part of that kingdom. One of the most fascinating things about this passage is that the treasure is unspecified. Think today about the treasures you have found in your life of faith. Are there more treasures to be explored or is it a season to marvel at the treasures you already hold? Wherever we are in our spiritual journey, sometimes the Spirit urges us – why not dig over there?

Wednesday

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven”

-Luke 6:22-23a



Heaven

Jesus tells us that we are blessed (which can mean “happy” or “to be envied”) when people devalue us, when they leave us out, and when they disgrace us for our faith. When we read passages like this, we must be so careful to consider whether we are tempted to wield them like a sword against our enemies or if we are tempted to shame our own spiritual life because it is somehow not contentious enough. The most important part of this verse is, “on account of the Son of Man.” The road that leads us to heaven is a path walked in love and compassion as well as concern for justice and integrity. Love that ignores evil is not love at all. Seeming justice that stampedes over one group or another is not justice at all. Profound love can make some people very upset or uncomfortable, but this is how we live for Jesus’s sake. Challenging injustice can inspire some turmoil, but it opens us to deeper grace for all people. If people would shame you for living in the light of love, be glad and leap for joy. When we live in love, we anticipate our life in heaven to come.

Thursday



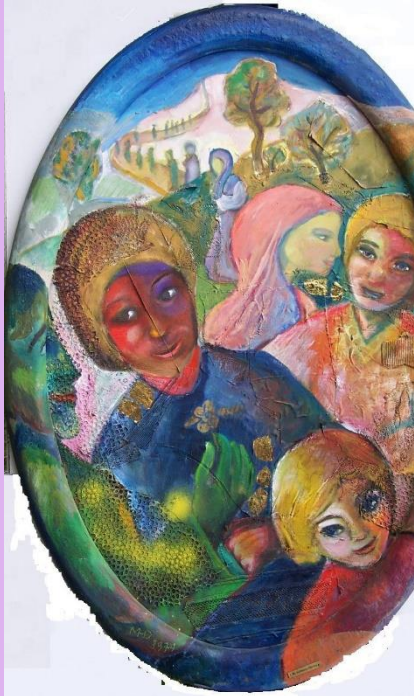
“Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

-John 16:20-22

Labor

Jesus tells us that we will have pain and sorrow – troubles so great that we will cry aloud. And the world’s response to this grief will be to delight in it. But, Jesus assures us that even this deepest pain will become joy for us. No matter the cruelty of those around us when we suffer, Jesus promises to restore our joy when we see him again. We are like mothers in labor, fighting, pushing, struggling, working to get to Jesus. We know that some labors are easier and others can be catastrophic. Yet, Christ is the ultimate end of all of our labor and the joy he brings will never leave us. When life gets hard, labor on! Keep breathing and push!

Friday



“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’”

-Matthew 25:14-16, 19-21

Entrust

We are each born with innate gifts and talents. As we grow up, we have access to a different range of opportunities and resources. Everything that we have and everything that we are has been given to us by God. God has entrusted us with all the blessings and abundance of our lives. Jesus tells this parable to get us to think – what have we done with what we have been given? Have we been faithful with what we have? Do our lives spread hope, peace, joy, and love? It is our joy to serve God faithfully as we strive to show ourselves trustworthy. May we each finally hear the ecstatic words, “enter into the joy of your master.”

Saturday



“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

-John 15:8-11

Abide

Jesus tells us to abide in his love and in the Father’s love. This word “abide” has such a fascinating range of meaning: it could mean to stay, to continue, to endure, to be present, to tarry, or to dwell. What it comes down to is this: where do you make your home? Does your heart live in fear, impatience, hatred? Or, does it live in trust, steadfastness, and love? The thing about “abiding” is that it can be a short-term stay or a permanent residence. So, if parts of our hearts have moved into a bad spiritual neighborhood, Jesus tells us that any day can be moving day. And as we live and move more and more of our being into the light of grace, we find a precious promise. Jesus’s joy will be in us and our joy will be complete. We will know fullness and satisfaction and rest. With promises like these, maybe it’s time to pack up some boxes!

- Sunday
 - Detail of the “Annunciation of the Angel to Saint Zechariah,” by Domenico Ghirlandaio, the Cappella Tornabuoni frescoes in Florence, Italy, 1480.
- Monday
 - “Sheep” by Justine FG
- Tuesday
 - “Landscape II” by Silvio Mechow
- Wednesday
 - “Triumph of the Holy Name of Jesus” by Giovanni Battista Gaulli, at the Chiesa del Gesù in Rome, 1676-1679
- Thursday
 - Stained glass window of the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth from Pfarrkirche St. Martinus (Parish Church of St. Martin) in Wangen im Allgäu, Germany.
- Friday
 - “Endless Road” by Catherine Doherty, 1971, Russian.
- Saturday
 - “Sermon on the Mount” stained glass by Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) at Arlington Street Church (Boston).