

Sermon for December 29, 2024
Highland Presbyterian Church
Sermon texts: Psalm 126:1-3, Luke 2:8-10, Matthew 2:9-10
Sermon by: Rev. Adrian White

Mary Oliver writes in her famous poem “Don’t Hesitate,”

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don’t hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that’s often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don’t be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.

The poet here expresses something that the shepherds and the wise ones learned all those hundreds of years ago: Sometimes joy just *shows up*. Maybe it’s in the message of an angel or the sight of a star, maybe it’s in a perfect bite of food or meeting a new friend who you can just tell is going to change your life. These moments are often disruptive, taking us off course from the life we expected to be leading or the tasks we were trying to complete. In those moments, we get to choose how to respond. Do we keep our focus on what’s in front of us, or do we let ourselves be derailed by a glimpse of joy?

I don’t want to read tooo much into it, but in these brief snippets from Luke and Matthew, I noticed a difference in the responses of the shepherds, who thought they were having a regular old night, and the magi, who were already seeking the joy of Jesus. When the angels interrupt the shepherds at their work, they are overcome with terror as they try to process the joyful news of the messiah; the magi skip straight to joy, because they were already expecting it. I don’t say this to insist that one response was clearly superior and more worth emulating. It’s brave and beautiful to choose joy when it takes us by surprise.

And the result was the same, after all: Shepherds and wise ones, lit up with joy, moved toward Jesus. Both responses lead me to wonder: how do we orient ourselves toward the joy that dwells in us and which the creator is inciting in the world so that we’re ready for it when it bubbles to the surface??

Because the thing about joy is that it’s *always* there – sometimes it just gets submerged by all the other stuff. But joy is ours from the beginning. Consider a child, delighted by baby animals and colorful toys and also like, paper bags that make a crunchy noise. Joy is our default setting. Joy is not a privilege, and it’s not a destination. We don’t have to earn it, and we don’t have to apologize for feeling joy when others are experiencing barriers to joy. Joy is

simply ours. But those of us who are no longer children may need encounters like these to re-illuminate joy, kindle its spark, set it ablaze in us. When life and suffering and the grief of the world distract us from joy, it tends to make itself known in the middle of things — in the middle of fields, in the middle of the night, in the middle of the journey.

Have you ever felt that strange juxtaposition - or maybe it's more like a collision? Like, has a joke ever made you laugh so hard you couldn't breathe while you were at the reception after a funeral? Have you ever been in the middle of the worst day ever at work or school, only to suddenly get a message from a far away friend that they're coming for a visit? Have you ever been ready to give up, only to have a brand new possibility fall in your lap?

Or --- have you even seen images of children gleefully watching puppet theater in the middle of a refugee camp in Gaza? Or videos of therapy dogs visiting patients in the hospital? This is what I mean when I say joy is always there, alongside the grind and the grief that is also an inescapable part of being. Joy doesn't eliminate sources of pain, but joy and pain are inescapable parts of the balance and texture of a life.

The writer Ross Gay explores this idea in his beautiful collection of essays, *Inciting Joy*. Throughout his poems, essays, and teaching, Ross Gay explores the world through themes of delight, gratitude, and joy, while being unflinching about the contexts of pain, poverty, racism, and alienation that he and the people he loves find themselves in.

In the opening essay of *Inciting Joy*, he muses:

What happens if joy is not separate from pain? What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another? Or even more to the point, what if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other *through* those things? What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what effloresces from us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks?

Gay posits that rather than warring with sorrow and trying to banish it, we might consider welcoming it in, giving it the most comfortable seat in the house. He casts this outrageously beautiful image of hosting a potluck and inviting everyone to bring a dish and a sorrow to share. When people are together and unafraid to reveal their aches and pains, community blooms that is strong enough to hold the collective sorrows of its individual members so that no one's load is so heavy. With each person's burden so lightened, the joy that is just as fundamental to each of them will make itself known above the din. He concludes the introduction with a hunch that frames the rest of the book and, though Gay is not religious, offers what has become for me a central theological frame:

My hunch is that joy is an ember for or precursor to wild and unpredictable and transgressive and unboundaried solidarity. And that that solidarity might incite further joy. Which might incite further solidarity. And on and on. My hunch is that joy, emerging from our common sorrow—which does not necessarily mean we have the same sorrows, but that we, in common, sorrow—might draw us together. It might depolarize us and de-atomize us enough so that we can consider what, in common, we love. And though attending to what we hate in common is too often all the rage, noticing what we love in common, and studying *that*, might help us survive. It's why I think of joy, which gets us to love, as being a practice of survival.

I love thinking of *joy* as a practice — like a habit, a ritual, or a skill that we simply must make time for even when our obligations and our sorrows make it easy to put off for another day, and another. And to add the theological layer to Gay's metaphor, my hunch is that joy is not a distraction from the suffering and injustice that God calls us to respond to, but rather a steady note in perfect harmony with the whole of life. When we tune our ear to it, we might find that joy transforms the burdens of individual suffering into something that we can carry together in bold solidarity with our neighbors.

What if amidst all the tendrils pulling at our attention, we kept our sights set on joy, kept our feet moving in the direction of joy, were willing to give in when joy showed up in the middle of powering through our to-do list, were willing to follow the way to Jesus and the way of Jesus? As we head into 2025, let's keep our posture open to notice the joy which is God's self at loose in the world. Let's stretch and warm up our hearts so we are ready to follow the lure of joy toward justice, compassion, reconciliation, and love. Let's practice joy as the key to survival not just for ourselves but for our communities and creation.

Emmanuel means God is with us. Christmas means joy is in us. We choose how to live in response. When the star comes into the sky, when the angel shows up with good news, when joy pops forth from the soil like a little green shoot, don't hesitate.