

Sermon for Advent 3C **“Deep Joy”** December 17, 2023
Luke 1:46 – 55 (Song of Mary) by Rev. Jim Hill

I get the Globe and Mail newspaper daily, and one of my favourite editorial columnists is a Jewish woman named Marsha Lederman. About a week ago, she wrote a column called *“This holiday season, it’s hard to feel festive”*. She expresses what many of us are feeling, when she says that normally she loves Christmas festivities but *“things feel different this year”*.

Let me read to you a bit of her column. She says:

“It’s hard to get into the holiday spirit when innocent civilians who don’t have the good fortune of living in Canada are being bombed or held hostage. When we are being pummeled with terrible news from the Middle East, as well as the seemingly endless war in Ukraine; the cost-of-living, homelessness and deadly drug crises on the home front; and a climate catastrophe everywhere.”

Toward the end of the column, she says:

“Geopolitics aside, many people are suffering personal grief. [For them] The near constant bombardment of Yuletide cheer from every direction can be painful. Even a trip to the grocery store can be triggering ...”

Ms. Lederman ends her column by wishing:

“That you can get a break from whatever it is that is causing you stress or distress. My real wish feels impossible: peace on Earth. But perhaps we can at least try for goodwill toward each other.”

She’s right. It is hard it is to feel festive and happy in the midst of suffering, even when those suffering are on the other side of the world.

It's especially hard to feel happy when you or someone you love is in major physical pain or in the agony of grief.

But we should distinguish between happiness and joy, according to Pamela King, who is a Doctor of Psychology teaching at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, and is also an ordained pastor.

She writes:

"I have observed that many people have an enduring and underlying sense of something that is deeper than the emotion of happiness, and I have come to describe this as joy. In my study of joy, I have also noticed that joy is more complex than a feeling or an emotion. Joy is something one can practice, cultivate, or make a habit. Consequently, I suggest that joy is most fully understood as a virtue that involves our thoughts, feelings, and actions in response to what matters most in our lives. Thus, joy is an enduring, deep delight in what holds the most significance."

What are the things in life that hold the most significance for you?

Ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle identified three things as the most significant and important in life: beauty, truth and goodness. In later centuries, Christian philosophers agreed, and they called beauty, truth and goodness "the transcendentals", the "highest properties of being".

This is true. Beauty, truth and goodness are three of the most important things that are able to give us deep and lasting joy.

First, there's beauty. Whole books have been written about the deep joy there is in appreciating the beauties of nature, such as a glorious sunset

or a colourful bird or a magnificent flower. This kind of joy is more than happiness. It's more like being overcome with admiration and love of what you're looking at. You may "ooh" and "aah" as you look up at a giant tree, or taste a piece of delicious fruit! You may weep for joy at hearing a beautiful piece of music. So, yes, there is deep joy in being able to appreciate beauty.

Secondly, there's deep joy in the discovery of truth, especially a truth that you've been seeking for a long time. Truth enlightens our mind and, in a way, heals our soul. It's a joy to finally make rational sense of a bunch of different ideas, and be able to see the harmony and beauty in that truth.

And thirdly, there's goodness. Goodness can be a source of deep joy, especially when you find goodness in a human being who is even-tempered, upright, honest, and caring. What a joy it is, to get to know a truly good person! I recall a verse from the Gospel of John, chapter 1 (v 47), where Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him, and exclaims: "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Jesus found joy in Nathanael's genuineness.

There are still many good people in this world, and there have been many good people throughout history. But one historical personage, Jesus the Christ, was goodness personified. Jesus was God in human form, who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." The deepest joy, for me, has been getting to know the beauty, truth and goodness of this divine Son of God.

I want to mention a fourth thing that brings deep joy, and that is, finding a purpose in life.

I've been reading a book that I got from the library, published just last year, entitled, "The Well-Lived Life" subtitled: "A 102-year-old Doctor's Six Secrets to Health and Happiness at Every Age", by Doctor Gladys McGarey.

There's a part early in the book where Dr. McGarey writes about a woman named Lilian. Lilian and her husband and their two sons had been healthy and happy for many years, and the Doctor had treated them successfully for various health problems over the years.

Lilian came to see her one day, but with no specific symptoms. She complained that she was extremely lacking in energy. After talking with her more about her symptoms and getting nowhere, Dr. McGarey finally asked her, gently, "What do you think is wrong?" After a long, thoughtful pause, she finally said: "I guess I don't have anything to live for anymore." Lilian explained that she'd always had everything in life she wanted, that she "liked her life" and had "nothing to complain about, but ... (she said) nobody needs me anymore. I don't feel like my life has any meaning."

Lilian said, "My boys don't live at home anymore. My husband has his work, and it doesn't seem to matter what I do for the children, because their problems never really go away. It's more depressing than anything else. What am I even here for? I've already done everything I needed to do, and there's no point in being alive." She began to weep.

"I don't know what to do next. Maybe there is nothing to do next. Maybe I'm done." The doctor writes: "I hugged Lilian fiercely, silently

commending her bravery. And then I tried to explain to her that she still had important things to do with her life.”

A few days later, Lilian had a fall and broke her right hip. When Dr. McGarey heard about it, she visited Lilian in the hospital. Lilian was frustrated because she felt useless. She said, "What can I do from a hospital bed?"

Anyway, the upshot was that, through the hospital she became involved in activities in which she was able to help others, and found a sense of purpose in life once again. And that had a profound effect not only on her mental health but also her physical health.

In the book, Dr. McGarey goes on to talk about scientific studies which have shown that “a high sense of purpose can help people live longer — and better”. “And,” she says, “the joy this brings to our lives ripples out to the world around us ...”

God has given to you and to me a purpose in life, and when we find that purpose, we find joy in living.

Our Gospel reading for today is Mary’s joyful response to the announcement by the angel Gabriel that she was to conceive and give birth to a son, and call him Jesus, who would be “holy” (the angel said), the very “Son of God”. Talk about finding your purpose in life! It dropped right into her lap! More than that, Mary’s purpose was unique in all of history! So, even though she was unmarried, she rejoiced greatly!

So, experiencing beauty, truth, and goodness, and having a purpose in life, are sources of deep joy.

There's one more I'd like to mention, and that is LOVE. According to the Holy Scriptures, the greatest reason for joy is love – to love and be loved, whether it's love between you and your life-partner, you and a family member, or you and a friend.

I have a friend in Kelowna whom I got to know in grade one of elementary school. He was one of my best friends right through to grade 12. In high school we played guitar together and were part of a band for a while. What a joy that was! He went on to be a lawyer and I went on to be a pastor, and we still, to this day, keep in touch and try to meet up once in a while. It's a kind of brotherly love that still brings me joy to this day!

I believe that the deepest joy in life is to love and be loved. I find deep joy even in the love between me and my miniature Schnauzer named Cassie. This beautiful, affectionate, loving creature is also a great joy to my wife Dawn, and perhaps most of all to our son Luke who is an only child. I'm sure the dog feels deep joy. I know I do, every day when I interact with that dog.

The joy of loving and being loved is like nothing else. The deepest joy of all, however, has to be: the knowledge that God loves us, so much that we will be saved even through death.

God is love, says St. John in the New Testament. God invented love, and beauty, and truth and goodness, and gave them to us as a free gift. I sometimes weep for joy at God's extravagant love and amazing grace, which God proved for all time, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

Christ. The deep love God showed us in Jesus, the source of our salvation, is the deepest joy we can have.

Let me close with some words of Jesus from the Gospel of John chapter 16, beginning at verse 16:

“A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.” Then some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying to us, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me,’ and ‘because I am going to the Father’?”

Jesus answers in verse 20:

“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.”

Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

for Advent 3, Dec. 17, 2023

In this season of hope and anticipation, we pray for the church and for the world, and especially for those in need.

1. O Come, Emmanuel, and dwell in our hearts with your love. Give us the joy of your presence, and give us a spirit of thanksgiving, moving us to share your love and compassion, loving others as you have loved us. May your love be received by many, and may they give thanks by loving one another, within their families, among their friendship circle and beyond to neighbours and others they hold close in their hearts

2. Dear God, we pray this morning for the faith communities in Victoria and throughout the world. We pray especially for our partners, the Anglican Church in Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. We pray especially for the congregations of our BC Synod, Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran in Comox and our seminaries in Saskatoon and Waterloo and for all faculty, staff and seminary students. We pray that they may find leaders who are intelligent, wise, and loving, who are motivated by Your love, shown so clearly in Your Son Jesus. We pray especially for our own congregation, Grace Lutheran Church, and the faithful persons gathered and worshipping here today. Bless them with joy in their work for You and Your church, and bless them with the joy of seeing their work bear fruit.

3. O God of Compassion, draw near to all who are oppressed and neglected, and those who are depressed and living with substance abuse disorders. Help them find a way toward self-love and self-

respect, through communities of mutual help and recovery. May your Spirit sustain all who know the burdens of pain, illness or uncertainty. Comfort them in their times of need. We pray especially for those we name aloud or quietly in our heart at this time ...

4. God, you are the giver of all good things:

We thank you for daily giving us the opportunity to repent of our sins and to begin anew. We thank you for the self-knowledge that humbles us, and the knowledge of You which exalts us. We thank you for those who helped us onto the right path when we were young, and those who are still helping us navigate our way through these troubling times. We thank you for the opportunities you have given us to serve you by serving others. We pray, give us joy in our work. We thank you for those who are celebrating the gift of another birthday, another anniversary, a new home, a new friend, or a new start in life.

Finally, we thank you for those special blessings we have received and which we name aloud, or in the silence of our hearts at this time

...

5. God of Creation, in this winter season, nurture dry and dormant lands so that in spring they will blossom and once more bring forth fruit. Move us to do our part, small though it may be, to be good stewards of all your Creation. Strengthen our resolve to achieve healthier air, purer water and cleaner soil. And move us to share the abundance of good things you have given us, so that all may have useful work and sufficient security and resources to meet their daily needs.

6. Eternal God, move the hearts of world leaders to set aside self-glorification and national pride, and be courageous and unwavering

in their convictions to seek peace and pursue it. And help their citizens to be less angry, to work towards reconciliation and peace and to be more generous in sharing with others less fortunate.

Almighty God, we entrust to you all for whom we pray, trusting that You will answer our prayers as you know best.

... through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**