

Great Joy
Christmas Eve 2020
Triune Mercy Center
Luke 2: 1-16
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Great joy was the starting point of the angel's message to the shepherds on that night so long ago. And ever since then, good news of great joy has been at the heart of our celebration of Christmas.

But it's difficult to feel the joy this year: here we're having Christmas Eve worship in an empty sanctuary, with no congregational carols, no in-person communion, no exuberant hugs; everybody is scattered across the city rather than gathered together. Pandemic grief and restrictions weigh heavily on us; we're keenly aware of so many people without jobs, without food, without in-person AA meetings, and with more of the same to come in the new year, as well as the threat of mass evictions. Joy can seem inappropriate, and downright insensitive and tone deaf, in these pandemic days.

And yet... We long for joy. We need joy. And that makes me think that we were made for joy; we were hard-wired for joy.

Joy is mentioned over and over again throughout Scripture, but the interesting thing is that many times, it is linked with things that we think of as the opposite of joy. In the text I just read, joy and fear are mentioned in the same breath: the shepherds are terrified when they first see the angel, so the angel says to them, "Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy." Centuries before that, the Psalmist pairs the word joy with weeping and tears, when he writes that "weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5); "those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy" (Ps. 126:5). In the Gospel of John, Jesus says "you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy." And the Apostle Paul even writes "I find joy in my sufferings." So we see in Scripture that joy comes in the midst of fear, suffering or sorrow; joy is somehow a golden thread woven into the messiness of life.

Have you ever noticed how those whose lives are very difficult can be the ones who say with true joy, "God is good, all the time; all the time, God is good." I've heard this multiple times from folks here at Triune, as they struggle mightily with addiction or food insecurity or disability or PTSD, and every time, it puts me to shame. It reminds me in that joy is not dependent on our outward circumstances, but is a gift of God in the midst of troubles.

Sometimes we can anticipate joy, such as an upcoming wedding or the birth of a baby. Other times joy comes to us unbidden; it can burst upon us when we're not expecting it, surprising us with delight, such as spotting a heron fishing in the Reedy River or hearing beautiful music or receiving an unexpected gift or the quiet joy of talking with a friend. Yet other times we can prepare our hearts for joy by being intentional about nurturing gratitude; there does seem to be a significant connection between gratitude and joy. We were made for joy.

Krista Tippett, the journalist who created and hosts the NPR show called *On Being*, writes that “Joy is not a luxury, it is not a privilege for a few. It is a resilience-giving, life-giving birthright. We can’t call forth in the world something we don’t believe in and embody ourselves. And joy is as powerful as anger.”

Joy can even be an act of resistance against the power of evil and oppression and death. A political activist named Rebecca Solnit wrote: “Joy doesn’t betray activism; joy sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine act of insurrection.” This quote from her reminds me of hearing years ago that the South African government during apartheid days actually outlawed group singing; they knew that the songs of the resistance movement were powerful beyond measure.

Experiencing and expressing joy is a way to thumb our noses at the power of evil and oppression and death; it’s a way of saying “you don’t have power over me.” In the midst of the very real pain of life, we can claim the goodness of life, we can claim our birthright of joy, by singing, dancing, laughing, and making love.

Delonte Gholston, an African-American pastor, shares a startling experience of joy: (in *Joy is an Act of Resistance*, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/joy-is-an-act-of-resistance_b_594cb975e4b0c85b96c6584b)

In the summer of 2017, hundreds of people were packed into the New Revelation Baptist Church to pay their last respects to Darius Smith, a 15-year-old child who was killed by an off-duty customs agent in Arcadia, California. Football coaches, mentors, family members and friends told story after story of how this young man had made a positive impact on their lives and how devastated they were to lose him.

As I stood amid a sea of mostly young black faces, I found myself asking hard questions about what has become a dangerously mundane ritual around young black bodies. We know the ritual all too well. They are killed. We cry out for justice. They are slandered, defamed, and discredited in the press. We uphold their memories as sacred before God. A funeral is held. Justice is denied. And like an old cassette tape, the world presses stop, rewind, and play. Stop. Rewind. Play.

How on earth is anyone to find solace in the midst of such overwhelming grief? How in the world is anyone to eek out an ounce of hope to press on?

As I began to slip into the depths of my own sorrow, I looked up and saw Darius’s mother, Rishawna Myricks. What was she doing? How was she coping? Well, as the choir sang, “Jesus is My Help”, she was dancing. That’s right, dancing.

And as we made our way out of the church and then jumped into cars to file over to the cemetery, she was the one who, along with local Black Lives Matter activists, led her community in a chant to “Say His Name!!” And we did.

And when the horse drawn carriage with the bullet riddled body of her slain son passed by, someone in the family car behind the carriage once again did something that I did not expect. They rolled the windows down and turned the music all the way up to play one of Darius’s favorite songs. And as if

nobody there missed a beat, Darius' mother and everybody there knew that it was time to dance in his honor. And so we did. Every single person let the healing waves of music wash over us, and just danced our hearts out right where we stood. We danced like Darius was right there with us. For in that moment, he truly was. It could not have lasted for any more than two minutes. But for those two minutes we turned that cemetery from a place of death and mourning into a place of life and honor. I have no earthly idea how it happened. Somehow, we followed his mother's lead, and it just happened.

At that moment, I witnessed the joy of a community that, even in mourning, knew that it had access to one of the most powerful tools of resistance to a system of (state sponsored) violence and oppression that seeks to crush the joyful spirits of vibrant communities like these. As a Christian pastor, I saw Isaiah's prophecy come alive: "you have turned my mourning into dancing, my sorrow into joy". I heard echoes of Nehemiah encourage his people to rebuild when they were being oppressed by a brutal and ruthless power, by saying that the "joy of the Lord is your strength".

I am not suggesting here that joy will always be present in times of mourning. Every person and every community must grieve and resist in a way and at a pace that is right and healthy for them. Yet, on that day, that family illustrated to us the power of joy. Especially in the face of a brutal and oppressive empire, the power to have joy is the power to resist. And this is the kind of joy that no evil power can extinguish. This is the joy of resistance. This is the joy of the Lord that is our strength.

Thanks be to God! Amen.