

Advent 3 B 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Psalm 126

John 1:6-8

Rejoice always.  
Joy is beyond definition;  
Joy, even, defies description,  
But we know it when we see it.

Once, years ago now,  
I went to the hospital to make two visits.  
First, to the bedside of someone dying too young.  
And then, to see a newborn baby  
And her family.

I was standing in front of the elevators,  
Preparing my heart and mind,  
as well as I could,  
For the first visit.

There was no one else around,  
Until a couple arrived  
With a bright balloon that said,  
Big Sister.

The chime rang,  
The elevator doors opened,  
And the big sister appeared,  
A little girl I knew well  
As a solemn sort of child.  
She flung her arms wide,  
And hopped up and down.  
Her face shone like the sun.  
She got off, gave me a hug,  
Accepted the balloon from her friends,  
And skipped away.  
I got on,  
And carried her radiance with me  
On my sad journey.

Rejoice always.  
The pink candle that disrupts the solemn season.  
The nonsense that realigns the chaos.  
Rejoice always.

That is the invitation,  
The command for this day.

Wise words, and foolish words.  
Who would not want to live joyfully,  
Always?  
And yet –  
Joy is beyond our control.

Like suffering and mystery,  
It has been said,  
Joy is a thin place in our world,\*  
A moment, or an experience,  
An event,  
Where the veil between the worlds parts,  
And we come in contact with that vastness,  
The heart-cracking beauty,  
The overwhelming goodness  
That we try to contain  
By using the word “God.”

How can joy,  
That sudden, unexpected,  
Unbidden spark and sparkle  
Be an always kind of thing?

We could never sustain that.  
It is completely beyond our control.

And, paradoxically,  
That is the only reason it makes any sense  
To listen to the evangelist,  
Or the prophet, or the psalmist  
When they tell us to rejoice always.

We cannot manufacture joy.  
And thank goodness for that.

If we could make our own joy,  
What a terrible responsibility.  
It would be impossible to make joy always,  
Any more than it would be within our power  
To pray without ceasing,  
As an act of will.  
Or to give thanks in everything,  
By focusing on gratitude at every moment.

We are not made that way,  
Even in the best of times.

And these, as we know too well,  
Are not the best of times.

Polar bears are scrounging for scraps  
In Siberian garbage dumps.  
Rejoice always.  
Refugees are cold and wet and hungry,  
And sick, in overcrowded camps  
On Samos and in Sudan and Syria.  
Pray without ceasing.  
Three thousand people are dying each day  
From a disease that could have been better controlled.  
Give thanks in everything.  
A feckless narcissist continues his seditious lies  
And threatens, in his hapless way, to undermine our democratic structures.  
Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks.  
And do not quench the spirit.

This is folly,  
And it is wise,  
With a wisdom that is beyond us.

If we think joy can be manufactured,  
Or ceaseless prayer be maintained by discipline,  
If we think we can discover an occasion for thanksgiving  
In every circumstance,  
Then we are pitiable numbskulls.

And, in fact, we are.

But –  
We have the capacity for joy,  
And the longing for prayer.  
And, the profound experience  
That gratitude, giving thanks,  
Is not exhausting, but renewing.

So how do we invite, and embrace,  
How do we cultivate  
Those gifts that are so far beyond our control?

We cannot make joy happen;  
We cannot maintain ceaseless prayer,

And there are some times, and places,  
And situations where we simply cannot,  
With any authenticity,  
Give thanks.  
And, to top it all off,  
we are spirit-quenchers.

Do not quench the spirit  
Is the capstone.  
But the fact is, we are spirit quenchers.  
No matter how hard we try,  
We miss vital connections,  
We fail to respond to invitations,  
We flub our chances at reconciliation and renewal.  
The spirit comes among us and within  
Like wind and fire,  
And we pour cold water on it –  
Some of us without meaning to,  
Some of us entirely on purpose.

It happens again and again.  
It happened with John the Baptist.

John the Baptist testified to the light,  
And even though he pointed beyond himself  
To the light that is already and always  
Standing in our midst,  
The questions he got  
Were not about the light,  
But about his credentials.  
Who are you?  
Were we expecting you?

Offered a vision of the holy  
Lighting up the everyday,  
Instead of rejoicing,  
We try to pull it apart,  
See what it's made of,  
Try to duplicate the experiment and verify the findings.

That makes sense.  
But it's not the way of joy.  
Again, that's who we are.  
Spirit quenchers, most of the time.  
But that is not all we are.  
We are made in the image and likeness

Of the source of joy.  
And we can still,  
Anywhere,  
Any time,  
Be surprised by joy.  
This is the gospel truth.

The gospel doesn't make sense.  
It makes joy.  
It makes peace,  
And hope.

The gospel doesn't make sense.  
It makes love.

Rejoice always.  
Pray without ceasing.  
Give thanks always and everywhere.

But how do we invite and embrace  
those gifts we cannot create or control?

In the midst of anguish, and loneliness,  
And frustration and fear,  
How do we make room for the holy?

There is no other way, for us,  
Than to follow in the way of Jesus,  
Who knew anguish, and loneliness,  
And frustration, and yes, fear.

The one to whom John the Baptist points,  
The one who is already standing among us,  
Waiting to be seen and known,  
The light of the world,  
Unquenchable.

He is already and not yet here.  
He is coming in disguise,  
Hidden as his authentic self.

Jesus is the one who rejoices always,  
Even in the midst of suffering.  
He rejoices, because for him  
The veil between daily experience and holy essence has disappeared.  
He is always in the presence of the holy.

And in the presence of the holy,  
There is no now and then, but only always.  
We can touch that,  
Now and then,  
And when we do,  
There is joy, and the moment is always.  
Rejoice always.

Jesus prays without ceasing.  
If prayer creates and maintains  
The vital connection between us and the holy,  
There was no beginning and ending  
Of that connection for him.  
We slip in and out of that vital connection,  
But we can trust  
That his abiding connection  
Leaves a way, always,  
For us to reconnect.  
Pray without ceasing.  
Give thanks in everything.

For Jesus, giving thanks is the source of his power,  
His effectiveness,  
His ability to share the abundance of the holy  
With those who are hungry,  
Hungry for food,  
Hungry for liberation,  
Hungry for justice,  
Hungry for meaning,  
For freedom, for peace.

Always, before he acts,  
Jesus gives thanks.  
Before he heals the sick,  
He gives thanks.  
Before he feeds the crowds,  
He gives thanks.  
His continual thanksgiving  
Means abundance for us,  
Healing for us,  
And, when we can,  
When we remember,  
Thanksgiving for us.

Rejoice always.  
Pray without ceasing.

Give thanks always and everywhere.  
These things are beyond our control,  
And yet, they have been given to us  
By the one who is already standing among us,  
Ready to be seen,  
And known.  
Ready to be born again.

\*This contemporary adaptation of the ancient Celtic understanding of physical “thin places” was first suggested, I think, by Peter Gomes in *The Good Book*.