

Let us pray... Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of joy. May our hearts be attuned to the melodies of joy that echo through the tapestry of our existence. And may our hearts be open to joy even when it reverberates in the most unlikely of spaces... Amen.

I love going for walks... They clear my mind, they invigorate my spirit, and they feel good... However, this time of year, my walks outside get a little tricky, and are dependent upon the weather... So, if I can get my walk in, without going to the gym, I always opt for that...

The other day I was walking outside, along one of my favorite routes, when a kind stranger who was walking his dogs, started making his way toward me with a friendly wave...

I paused my earbuds and slowed my pace to a stop...

We said our hellos, and then he then said something to this effect... I just have to say, I see you walking on this road all the time and you have become an inspiration to me. I have been inspired to get out more and take my dogs with me. I just wanted you to know, because you never know who you are inspiring...

He was so joyful and genuine as he spoke, that it brought me joy...

Joy to know that in such a simple conversation, there is still goodness bursting from humanity...

People feel called to go out of their way, to say or do something genuine for another person, not expecting anything in return, but in turn they are spreading joy...

And on my quest to define joy this week, I came across a deep well of wisdom.

Joy being defined as, not happiness, because happiness is usually dependent upon something. Happiness is tied to desire and obtaining some "thing."

Whereas, joy is not something to be obtained or bought. Joy is a part of who you are, and because of that, joy can sneak in when you least expect it.

Even when life is hard or when you are going through something difficult, joy can still be a part of your reality, as strange as this may seem.

As Kate Bowler explains, joy “doesn’t discriminate between tragic time and ordinary time. It’s not a joy we can “choose” because that would often mean ignoring the reality of our heartbreak or circumstances. It just happens. Somehow. Some way. Showing up uninvited even in the most unlikely of situations.¹”

And I believe this happens, because joy is also a part of who God is... God takes delight and finds joy in humanity, and in you.

And since God is with us always, then God’s joy permeates all spaces...

Even in the hard times, or our times of not-knowing... God is there to do a new thing... God brings healing out of hardship, life out of death, and stirs up delight in the most ordinary or mundane of moments.

And joy is what we experience with one another on so many Sundays... Especially during the children’s sermon. These kids are fantastic, God shines brightly in each of them, and they are what it looks like to embody joy.

To think of this another way, to embody joy, is like going home... In a traditional sense if you have a safe and loving home... Joy is like going to a place where you find “peace, ease, delight and generous love.”²

Joy is our earthly dwelling of what it might feel like being held in God’s embrace... A place so serene, that the Holy Spirit can’t help but stir in you, bubbling up joy in what might be the strangest of circumstances.

Which is what happened to me, on my walk... Because after I started walking away from this joyful stranger, the Holy Spirit stirred within me...

¹ <https://courses.katebowler.com/courses/advent-devotional/lessons/week-3/topics/day-15/>

² <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2023/04/bearers-of-joy/>

And I found myself pondering this brief conversation...

Specifically, when he said, you never know who you are inspiring.

And this idea of inspiration, connects deeply with today's gospel focus on bearing witness...

Like John, we are called to bear witness to the light of Christ...

Because Christ's light changes everything.

Through bearing witness, others feel inspired to know God more... Which in turn changes the way they live and act... In an essence, they change the way they walk...

In fact, bearing witness can be so profound it can inspire us to examine the way we walk...

Especially, when we hear John's witness and testimony to the light...

Because we also need this reminder... We need someone to point us towards Christ's light, again and again throughout our lives...

Because it is simply too easy to miss Christ in our daily lives. It is simply too easy to say our prayers on autopilot... It is simply too easy to put off reading the Bible.

For example, the other night I noticed a gorgeous sunset from my office window. I pointed it out to Connie, who then pointed it out to all of the 2nd year confirmation kids, until we were all in my office admiring the last bit of sunlight burning in deep pinks, bright oranges, and surreal purples...

And this needed to be pointed out, or it would have been missed.

And even though Christ is not fleeting from our lives like a sunset is, so often we miss the light of Christ in our midst.

Light, that especially this time of year has a profound impact on our senses. Especially for those who suffer from seasonal depression. You know far too well how little the light glimmers on the horizon each day...

It seems to barley pop up and say hello, before it is emersed entirely into holy darkness.

As Dr. Karoline Lewis explains, "In the dead of winter, in the midst of darkest and the shortest days of the year, festivals of light were essential. John's first declaration of the incarnation, that the light of the world is continually shining when darkness should prevail, speaks to a fundamental human need for light. Before there is the Word made flesh, there is the promise that in the midst of all of the darkness of humanity, now light will shine.³"

Which is why the tradition of lighting the Advent wreath was started, to push back darkness and remind us, even as we wait for Christ, he is with us.

And on this third Sunday of Advent, our candle burns for joy.

The kind of joy that doesn't negate the heaviness of life... Especially when you are really struggling, suffering, or are in the uncomfortable space of waiting... Waiting for treatment, waiting for news, waiting for what's next.

Joy makes its way into those sacred spaces because it is a reminder that the hard times in life are not your only reality... There is something more....

There is joy reverberating in the most unlikely of spaces and from the deepest parts of your being.

Joy that fuels you to bear witness to Christ's light, because you never know who you are inspiring... Amen.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-john-16-8-19-28>