

**Joy to the World: The Joy of Expectation**

**Isaiah 11:1-10 CEB**

**Rev. Rachel Callender**

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**Medford UMC; NJ**

I once heard a tale about God delighting in creation. As the story goes, God was looking out over an empty field and was inspired to make the world's very first wildflower, and so God did. The flower brought God so much joy, that just as if God was a small child, God exclaimed, "Do it again!" So God created another flower. The same joy burst out of God, experiencing something absolutely wonderful. So God said, "Do it again!" and on and on this went until the earth was filled with flowers. And so a million trillion flowers later, out of pure joy, God continues to exclaim, "Do it again!"

Joy. Seemingly a simple concept yet often hard to come by. We talk about joy a lot in church, we even did an entire series on joy just last year, yet we often find ourselves in short supply of it. Overwork, tense relationships, pessimism and just general stress and anxiety often dilute the joy we could be experiencing. And ironically, our own desire to self-preserve, to analyze how something would benefit ourselves as opposed to others often comes in the way of unexpected, wholesome joy.

As we begin our Advent time together, a time that is about hope, peace, joy, love all anticipatory for the birth of Christ into the world, to save us from sin and evil, to break through a world of pain and sorrow with the joy of new life in God - it seems only fitting to put our focus on **Joy**. Before COVID we struggled with it, during COVID it often felt non-existent, and now as we explore a new normal, where our schedules are being

avalanched by old traditions and new traditions alike, we find ourselves scrambling to recreate it, to pull it from our muscle memory and then only find disappointment when we come up short.

Our series is called, "Joy to the World", like the song we sing as the "Silent Night" of Christmas Eve transforms into the celebratory birth of Christmas Day. But the song was not written to be a Christmas song. It's not even based off of the nativity story at all. Clergyman and English poet, Isaac Watts (a name that you'd see often when flipping through the Hymnal) began the life of what would become the song we know, as a simple paraphrasing of Psalm 98 and thus, was not about the first coming of Christ (meaning Christmas), but actually the second coming of Christ (meaning the Apocalypse). It's an accurate paraphrasing, as Psalm 98 is all about the whole world making a joyful noise for God's goodness and equity, how nature itself praises God: seas roar, and floods clap, and hills sing for joy over God's breaking into the world. English, German and American composers would put melodies to the paraphrase until it became the beloved Christmas Carol we now know and love.

The Psalm is about a present celebration over a future joy of God's Kingdom fully encompassing the earth; an anticipated joy that our scripture reading for today from the Prophet Isaiah, echoes. God's righteous judgement, the call for equity for those who have been oppressed and marginalized, and that nature itself will respond to God accordingly. It reads:

*The wolf will live with the lamb,  
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;  
the calf and the young lion will feed together,  
and a little child will lead them.*

*The cow and the bear will graze.*

*Their young will lie down together,  
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.*

*A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;  
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.*

*They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.*

*The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the  
Lord, just as the water covers the sea.*

He speaks of this peace and safety where there was once fear and violence - we know that wolves don't live harmoniously with lambs and that babies definitely shouldn't be playing with snakes. Isaiah doesn't write from a joyous, peaceful time in history. We definitely don't approach the text from a world at peace. The children of God have time and time again been met with hardship, and struggle, and loss - war and illness and heartache. Yet, like in many of the texts we're going to be looking at this advent, we see a hopeful Isaiah; an Isaiah that is picking up his head to look forward, not down, at what is to come.

One of the most famous paintings of this Isaiah text (which I believe we have a photo of), is by Quaker Minister, Edward Hicks as part of his "Peaceable Kingdom" collection. You'll see the expected depictions of all types of animals and children living in harmony but will note that on the far side is William Penn signing the legendary peace treaty with the Lenni Lenape people. Hicks' compares the promise of peace in Isaiah with the brokenness he feels over what could have been, true peace and neighborhood with Indigenous Americans, which we know did not

end up being the case; and who after centuries of violence, still experience marginalization to this day. Hicks brings this modern example to this ancient text as **hope** for a reconciliation and restoration built off of peace.

Long before the birth of Christ, it was this very anticipation that kept people from becoming paralyzed by pain and grief. Anticipation is much of the heart of the Christmas story, that joy was coming in the shape of God on earth. It's why we don't just celebrate Christmas as a one-day holiday, but as a 6-week season. Anticipation is so much of the actual celebrating! Which is also what often makes us feel down the day after Christmas, with all the preparation and gift-giving and decorating behind us. We're then just left with clutter to clean and Pepto-Bismol to drink. Our text today shows an Isaiah that seeks joy, even amongst unhappiness.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, "It's wonderful to discover that what we want is not actually happiness. It is not actually what I would speak of. I would speak of Joy. Joy subsumes happiness. Joy is the far greater thing."

We often think about the pursuit of happiness, the pursuit of this external, emotion that's very much a temporary response to outside factors; but our text today, the eagerness we have for Christmas Day, is about choosing joy even when things aren't necessarily happy. It's an independent, constant choice to be at peace even when things aren't good. Joy is the foundation which we can build a fulfilled life off of.

I found one source that said that happiness is having what you want, and joy is wanting what you already have. The nativity story is, for the most part, unhappy. There's secrecy, fleeing

persecution, genocide of infant boys, and unideal circumstances for going through something as traumatic and dangerous as birth. Yet joy broke through at the center for what would be the life and ministry of Jesus.

*On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.*

This morning, we began our Christmas season by lighting the candle of hope, hope for what the world can be through Christ's birth. We've done it before, this time last year, and today, I invite us to "do it again!" until joy springs up like a million trillion flowers. Until joy is inescapable, even in a broken world.