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Isaiah 55:10-13; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 2:8-10
“*Unto You – Great Joy*”
Year A – Advent Midweek 3
December 18, 2019

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Are you excited about Christmas? The children can hardly wait, of course, but do we feel the same way? Kids are usually thinking about the presents they might receive; there’s an excitement building each day as Christmas gets closer. As we get older, the excitement can certainly still be there, but we also have to be the ones who thinking about buying and wrapping presents, cleaning and decorating the house, getting ready for company, baking and shopping, and attending all the parties and the celebrations.

And that’s not even mentioning all the extra things going on at church! We have special worship services, children programs, and choir practices. And all of these things are good, of course! It’s not a bad thing to busy, but we shouldn’t allow the busyness to push aside the joy we have. After all, when we see families gathering, and loved ones returning home, when we enjoy the lights and decorations, when we experience the love and the memories, when we remember what the true meaning of Christmas is all about, the birth of our long-awaited Savior, we are reminded once again, no matter how busy this time of year may be, that this is most certainly a time of joy. *Great joy.*

The season of Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, has been a season of joy, as well, even if it’s a more subdued joy. Of course, Advent is a season of repentance, and most people don’t associate joy with repentance, but there’s a great joy we receive when we repent of our sins. Advent reminds us that we are still sinners who need a Savior. We need the Savior who was born in Bethlehem for us, the Lord who came to lay down his life for us. And if you need a Savior, which we do, then that means you need saving from something, something from which you couldn’t save yourself.

You were *dead* in your trespasses, but Christ came to offer his life in exchange for yours. He came to offer you forgiveness. And hearing that good news produces faith within you, faith to turn to God in sorrow for your sin. But even in sorrow, you find joy. Because although you recognize that your sin causes death, through the sorrow of repentance, you receive forgiveness, and therefore you receive great joy.

So, Advent is a season of joy because of repentance and forgiveness. But Advent brings joy in another way, too, because Advent is also a season of joyful anticipation. Not just for the festivities of Christmas, when we celebrate Christ’s birth, but also as we anticipate the eternal life Jesus will bring when he comes again. Even while we are patiently waiting on the Lord, we have that sudden burst of joy when we realize that God’s promise is coming near to us. His Advent, his arrival is almost here.

So, we have joy in Advent, great joy. This joy, both the joy that comes by means of repentance and forgiveness, as well as the joy of anticipation, waiting for our Savior, is represented on our Advent wreath this week by the pink or rose-colored candle. The third week of Advent is known as the joy week. As we light the candle, we’re joyfully thinking to ourselves, “I can hardly wait!” I will have great joy in about a week when Christmas arrives, but I will also have even greater joy on the day when Jesus returns.

In our Gospel Reading, we hear about the people who are waiting, the shepherds. The shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem were not necessarily waiting for Christmas. They had no

idea of what was about to happen. And we don't know if these shepherds were devout Jews who would have been waiting for God's promised Messiah to come. Maybe they were, but perhaps they were people who had given up hope. Or perhaps they were people who were just too busy with their everyday life to even think about God's promise of a Savior. Shepherds in those days were not known to be the most religious of people.

But whether those shepherds realized it or not, they *were* waiting. The Jewish people had been waiting for many centuries. As a people, they longed for the day when the Messiah, God's Anointed One, would come to save them. But it wasn't clear what to expect when he arrived. Many of the Jewish people were hoping for a powerful king, a mighty conqueror who would destroy the occupying forces of Rome and restore Israel to power. They longed for a great king, like David; they were waiting for the Son of David.

But regardless of what the shepherds outside of Bethlehem were waiting for, something they very likely did not expect was to be shown a newborn child, an infant. What's more, they very likely did not expect this infant, who would be king, to be born in a little town, in the feeding trough of an animal. And what's even more, they very likely did not expect any sort of Messiah to come on their watch, or that they would be the first ones invited to meet him! All they were likely waiting for was the coming daylight, waiting for the darkness of night to end. But in a profoundly heavenly way, that's exactly what they got. A light to end the darkness.

So, what are *you* waiting for? Think beyond Christmas, and even into the New Year, what are you waiting for? Are you waiting for some form of darkness in your life to end? Something that is taking your joy away from you? You may be struggling with financial worries or problems at home. Maybe you're not particularly looking forward to your family gathering, or maybe you don't have a family gathering to look forward to. Many people anticipate a familiar sense of loneliness that comes during the holiday season. Outwardly, many of us may appear joyful, but inwardly we may feel very differently.

And what's more, even beyond the holidays, all of us also face a familiar and persistent problem. The problem of sin, and that we're sinners, and we live in a sinful world. We have the same ongoing guilt and shame of our sins, regret over things we have wrongly thought, or done, or said, or things that we should have done but didn't. And that's why it is important to see Advent as a time of repentance, because it's a time to bring those sins now to the manger, to the Lord who was born so that he could carry our sin and guilt one day to the cross. That is the good news, the message of great joy that those sleepy shepherds were about to hear and see.

The great joy that those shepherds received shattered the darkness of the night and of their lives. But this joy wasn't only for them. And it wasn't only for Israel. This joy was for everyone in the world, including you and me. Christ the Lord was born. The long-promised Messiah had finally come. The Lord God himself had come to his people. How would the shepherds find this newborn Messiah? The angel gave them directions, "This will be a sign for you; you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Then an angelic chorus of praise sent the shepherds on their way to Bethlehem in great joy.

This is the good news of great joy, not just to be heard once a year, but every day, all year. Christ has come for you! He has come to lift away the darkness of your fear, and your sin and your guilt. He took that darkness from you, carrying your sin and shame in his body to the cross. In exchange he gives you forgiveness and joy—joy you can have now, and joy that you will have for eternity.

When Christmas is over this year, we will still be waiting, waiting for our Savior who has promised to come again one day. His first Advent, his first coming was in Bethlehem; his Second Advent, his second coming, will be on the Last Day. And until then, even though things aren't perfect yet, we still wait with great joy. We are filled with hope because our Savior has come

once, and he will come again. We wait with joy because our sins are forgiven and Jesus has promised to stay with us as we wait. And on that day, the darkness of night will finally end and the eternal light of day and endless joy will begin. Come, Lord Jesus! In his name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. **Amen.**

(This sermon adapted from the *Creative Communications* materials for the series, *Unto You* 2019.)