



ADVENT WEEK 3 | JOY

December 13, 2020

CALL TO WORSHIP | PSALM 126

It seemed like a dream, too good to be true,
when God returned Zion's exiles.
We laughed, we sang, full of joy,
we couldn't believe our good fortune.
We were the talk of the nations—
'GOD was wonderful to them!'
GOD *was* wonderful to us;
we are one happy people.

And now, GOD, do it again—
bring rains to our drought-stricken lives
So those who planted their crops in despair
will shout hurrahs of joy at the harvest,
So those who went off with heavy hearts
will come home joyously laughing, with armloads of blessing.

Song #1

WREATH LIGHTING | PEACE

Perhaps no psalm sums up the hope-filled tension of Advent better than psalm 126. Having known joy, forgiveness, rescue, and at the same time longing for a fresh expression amid the pains of living. Christmas time, as we have said these last two weeks, does not always arrive at the most expected season, but at the most needed. The sounds and decorations of yule time glee do not always fall on hearts filled with laughter, but often hearts heavy. Hearts full of sorrow for what is lost, what is not, and what might not be (or be again). Like psalm 126, Alfred Lord Tennyson knows the tension of Christmastide. That tension when the familiar sounds of church bells ringing out with exuberance to the world around, yet “the outer season of the world” fails to “reflect the inner season of the heart.”¹ The sounds of the season shut off from the sounds of the soul.

I’ve asked Cate Purser to read the entirety of Tennyson’s poem as a shared lament with those among us, like the psalmist and like Lord Tennyson, for whom Christmas brings with all its joyous hope of peace, also a spirit of lament. For those who hear the shout, “Joy to the World!” with heavy hearts. Listen, and read along, the words from *In Memoriam XXVIII* by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

In Memoriam XXVIII | Alfred Lord Tennyson

The time draws near the birth of Christ:
 The moon is hid; the night is still;
 The Christmas bells from hill to hill
Answer each other in the mist.

Four voices of four hamlets round,
 From far and near, on mead and moor,
 Swell out and fail, as if a door
Were shut between me and the sound:

Each voice four changes on the wind,
 That now dilate, and now, decrease,
 Peace and goodwill, they ring, goodwill and peace,
Peace and goodwill, to all mankind.

This year I slept and woke with pain,
 I almost wish’d no more to wake,
 And that my hold on life would break
Before I heard those bells again:

But they my troubled spirit rule,
 For they controll’d me when a boy;
 They bring me sorrow touch’d with joy,
The merry merry bells of Yule.

¹ Malcolm Guite, *Waiting on the Word*, 61.

Tennyson's poem is about his hearing the sound of bells (Four voices of four hamlets round) echoing from the nearby parish churches in Lincolnshire during the days drawing near to the birth of Christ (to Christmas morning). These familiar voices methodically ring out the season's declaration, one we shared last Sunday, "Peace and goodwill, goodwill and peace/Peace and goodwill to all mankind." Yet, for Tennyson, who lost much the year he writes these words, the gift of Christmas is clouded in mist and closed off from his heart. The light of Christmas hid from his sight. For Tennyson, and many others, Christmas has come not to his merriment but his pain. A constant ache at living that would rather not hear the sounds filling the air.

The bells sing out, as do our Sunday traditions and holiday expressions, with the melody of peace and goodwill, yet for those who are not well, who know no peace, who are 'numb with grief' at what the year has taken; for these, there is a sense that we are "shut out from joy." Rather than kindling within us the spark of vibrant life and adoration, the declarations of Christmas are a "sudden stab of bitterness and despair; grief [attacking] us even in the midst of, or perhaps because we are in the midst of, other people's peace and beauty."²

While Tennyson's confession that "This year I slept and woke with pain/I almost wish'd no more to wake/And that my hold on life would break/Before I heard those bells again," is a refrain echoed by many each and every year at this time; perhaps this year, of all years, no matter how we feel in this very moment, we each can empathize with the mourners like never before. We can share in the joy of Christmas and also share the doubts of faith that arise from the perennial problem of evil, even as the bells continue to proclaim their Christmas song.

It is in such gentle, compassionated repeat of the sounding joy amid the confessed doubt and despair that can be, perhaps, a balm in the slow, delicate process of healing until we can all share the great affirmation of redemptive joy³. Notice, like the laments of the psalms, that there is a turn in Tennyson's poem, a "But...I will praise you," a "Nevertheless..." which takes hold of his troubled soul,

But they [the gifts of Christmas, God with us] my troubled spirit rule,
For they controll'd me when a boy

"Somehow," writes Malcolm Guite, "the bells have summoned, behind the memory of loss, deeper memories,"⁴ memories, like the psalmist of 126, of when

It seemed like a dream, too good to be true,
when God returned Zion's exiles.
We laughed, we sang, full of joy,
we couldn't believe our good fortune.

Through memories of what has been (what God has done), amid the lament of what is (what we protest God to do), there, Tennyson says, is where the sounds of Christmas "bring me sorrow touch'd with joy." [While

² Ibid., 51.

³ Ibid., 52.

⁴ Ibid.

lighting the third Advent candle, say:] “Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of **joy!** He who goes out weeping...shall come home with shouts of **joy...**”

Let’s pray.

God of hope and peace and joy, you come to us in Jesus as King and Comforter. Your presence is unexpected and unsettling, but we know you, for we have known your healing and provision and love. Open our hearts to keep on singing this Christmas season and beyond, that we may live and act without fear. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Hymn/Carol

PRE-SERMON READING | JOHN 1:6-8, 19-27, 29-31

There once was a man, his name John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

When Jews from Jerusalem sent a group of priests and officials to ask John who he was, he was completely honest. He didn’t evade the question. He told the plain truth: ‘I am not the Messiah.’

They pressed him, ‘Who, then? Elijah?’

‘I am not,’ replied John.

‘The Prophet?’

‘No,’ said the baptizer.

Exasperated, they said, ‘Who, then? We need an answer for those who sent us. Tell us something—anything!—about yourself.’

‘I’m thunder in the desert, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Make the road straight for God!’ I’m doing what the prophet Isaiah preached.’

Those sent to question him were from the Pharisee party. Now they had a question of their own: ‘If you’re neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet, why do you baptize?’

John answered, ‘I only baptize using water. A person you don’t recognize has taken his stand in your midst. He comes after me, but he is not in second place to me. I’m not even worthy to hold his coat for him.’

The very next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and yelled out, ‘Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb! He forgives the sins of the world! This is the man I’ve been talking about, ‘the One who comes after me but is really ahead of me.’ I know nothing about who he was—only this: that my task has been to get Israel ready to recognize him as the God-Revealer. That is why I came here baptizing with water, giving you a good bath and scrubbing sins from your life so you can get a fresh start with God.’

SERMONETTE | Joy in the Wilderness

To encounter cousin John all clad in camel hair shirts and having recently taken up locust as his main dish after learning squirrel to be high in cholesterol, one must leave the city's familiarity and travel into the wilderness. Not too far, mind you, but just out of the ordinary patterns and comforts of daily life into the wilderness of Judea.

As we have said all along this Advent season, "John is the one who gets everything ready; you cannot jump into the goodness of Christmas without readiness from him."⁵ And we are only readied for the goodness of Christmas when we meet John where he is. It is in and out of this wilderness that John the Baptizer cries out, 'Make the road straight for God!' which means God is on the road and nearly here. He is coming! His arrival is near! It is in and out of the wilderness from which Advent (which means arrival) springs forth.

We must remember that the place of John's declaration of God coming (advent) and God with us matters. And, as Walter Brueggemann points out⁶, this place where we meet John is the wilderness, and the "wilderness is a place where the power for life is fragile and diminished. The inhabitants of the [wilderness, like their forefathers leaving Egypt and like the many wearied souls longing for a promised land and yet struggling to see it's nearness or how it might be reached] are those with weak hands and feeble knees and fearful hearts, those who have had their vitality crushed and their authority nullified and their will for life nearly defeated." Does this sound a place you have been this year? A place where you, our neighbors, a friend is now? To send up a cry in and out of the wilderness, is to call on behalf and alongside "the marginalized, the blind, the deaf, the lame, the dumb, all the disabled." All of which we have been are find ourself in the company of today.

It is into the wilderness, into the place where the power for life is fragile and diminished, where we sleep and wake with pain, that Jesus also enters the story. As Steven read, it was "The very next day," when "John saw Jesus coming *toward him*." Through the veil of mist and mystery, unrecognized by the priests, officials, and devout; only vaguely conceived by John himself, comes the one John's been talking about, the **God-Revealer!** The one who brings the gifts of God with us for which we longly await. From the place of fragility, isolation, exclusion, etc., enters the One who would later have songs written about him that sing, "Joy to the World! The Lord has come! Let earth receive her King!"

Think about that for a moment. The joy of the world enters the wilderness to begin his ministry, his declaring God's kingdom come, and his making of all things new.

A few verses before today's passage, another John, "the beloved," disciple describes the One who was to come after, but not in second place to "the baptizer." John the beloved describes the earth's King this way,

The true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance*, 16-17.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John [the baptizer] bore witness about him, and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'" And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

(John 1:9-16)

From the place where the power of life is fragile and diminished, proceeds "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Lowly, surprising, Jesus, "powerful in weakness, rich in poverty, wise in foolishness...[God-Revealer, embodying] the gentle, gracious, resilient, demanding power of God [with us]...not [trifling] in temples and cities and dynasties but in the [powerful grace] and truth of the creator God [amid the wilds of humanity]."7

And because we receive this most unadorned King as the only Son of the Father, we sing with shouts of joy! Because we receive him, the One who enters the same wilderness of fragile lives, of our fragile lives, at the moment when "we wished no more to wake," we keep singing even when the sounds of Christmas come to us clouded in a mist and shut off from our hearts. Even here, where the light of Christmas seems hid from sight, we keep singing the songs of all that Christ at Christmas brings—singing to God to do it again and again. Repeating the sounding joy, as God-with-us comes in and out of the wilderness. "our sorrow touch'd with joy," as we live the lives ruled—steadied and bound—by the hope and peace and joy of which we sing.

Pray with me.

God of hope and peace and joy, you come to us in Jesus as King and Comforter. Your presence in the wilderness is unexpected and unsettling, but we know you, for we have known your healing and provision and love. Open our hearts to keep on singing this Christmas season and beyond, that we may live and act without fear, as sowing tears and reaping joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Song #3

COMMUNION | CANTICLE 9

We added this year a new element to our Advent tradition, the reading of a canticle. These scriptures, often sung as a [chant](#) and fill the sanctuaries, halls, and homes of many of our sisters and brothers around the world this very morning. Together too, with those of every tribe, tongue, and nation, we receive the gifts of Christmas in Jesus' body broken and blood shed on our behalf.

We'll read this morning the first song of Isaiah, from Isaiah, chapter 12. A hymn of joy birthed by the light of truth and grace.

⁷ Ibid., 48.

I'll read the bulk of the hymn; then we'll say together the highlighted portion.

Canticle 9, The First Song of Isaiah (Is. 12:2-6)

Surely, it is God who saves me;
I will trust in him and not be afraid.
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense,
and he will be my Savior.
Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing
from the springs of salvation.
And on that day you shall say,
Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;
Make his deeds known among the peoples;
see that they remember that his Name is exalted.
Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things,
and this is known all the world.
Cry aloud, inhabitants of God's dwelling, ring out your joy,
for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of God's people.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

Song #4

SCRIPTURE READING | ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of GOD, the Master, is on me
because GOD anointed me.
He sent me to preach good news to the poor and afflicted,
heal the heartbroken,
Announce freedom to all captives,
pardon all prisoners.
GOD sent me to announce the year of his grace—
a celebration of God's destruction of our enemies---
and to comfort all who mourn,
To care for the needs of all who mourn in God's dwelling,
give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,
Messages of joy instead of news of doom,
a praising heart instead of a passive spirit.
Rename them 'Oaks of Righteousness'
planted by GOD to display his glory.
They'll rebuild the old ruins,

raise a new city out of the wreckage.
They'll start over on the ruined cities,
take the rubble left behind and make it new.

'Because I, GOD, love justice
and hate thievery and crime,
I'll pay your wages on time and in full,
and establish my eternal covenant with you.
Your descendants will become well-known all over.
Your children in foreign countries
Will be recognized at once
as the people I have blessed.'

We will sing for joy in GOD,
explode in praise from deep in our souls!
He dressed us up in a suit of salvation,
he outfitted us a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom who puts on a tuxedo
and a bride a jeweled tiara.
For as the earth bursts with spring wildflowers,
and as a garden cascades with blossoms,
So the Master, GOD, brings righteousness into full bloom
and puts praise on display before the nations.

Song #5

BENEDICTION | I THESSALONIANS 5:12-24

And now friends...Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part...warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.

Find joy no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live. Don't suppress the Spirit, and don't stifle those who have a word from the Master. On the other hand, don't be gullible. Check out everything, and keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted with evil.

May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the advent of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it!