

“Tidings of Joy”

Sunday December 14, 2025

Rev. Ursula E. Schreffler

Third Sunday of Advent

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ! Amen. One of the takeaways from our trip to Israel in 2022 was the scarcity of water in that country. Israel is part desert, so I guess this comes as no surprise. But the situation is like the Colorado River in our country; persistent drought conditions, the increasing demand for fresh produce, and growing populations have put a real strain on the water supply. There is also an ongoing debate over who owns and controls the water resources in Israel and the West Bank territories. So, one thing I learned is that little English-speaking children in that part of the world do not sing “Rain, rain, go away, come again another day.” Because rain is a real and necessary blessing. And if there is a small plot of open land, people plant as many olive trees as will fit. They are everywhere. On sidewalks, on hillsides, between buildings, next to roads, and along the highways. And when it comes time to pick the olives, the entire family chips in and helps. Families hold a picnic and even the smallest members can help collect the harvest. The harvest is a joyful and hopeful time for everyone on the margins of the desert.

The poetry of our passage from Isaiah reminds me of the seeds that lie below the surface, even in desolate places. Isaiah writes, *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and shouting.* Isaiah celebrates the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon. He also looks forward to a time when the LORD will come in glory and restore both humanity and creation to wholeness. His return will restore peace and healing to all the nations. As we celebrate the birth of the Christ child at Christmas, we too hold in the back of our minds the belief that Christ will come again. The prophet’s words don’t disappear once the Infant Christ is on the scene. No, the birth of Baby Jesus and Jesus’ life and death and resurrection help us look to the future, to God’s second Advent, when God will restore all that has been broken in this world.

Today is the 3rd Sunday in Advent, the day that carries the name “Joy Sunday.” This Sunday is traditionally a day when our joy is made complete, and we remember God’s power to heal and give hope. Today we express our joy by remembering God’s gift of his Son, and by sharing the good news with others. We have just collected Christmas gifts to help a local family and the Zion Women have collected gifts for the residents of the Merakey Home. Thanks to everyone who has pitched in to help these neighbors. I’m sure that your gifts will give the recipients the joy they deserve on Christmas morning.

The other message of Joy Sunday is the message of healing. Isaiah speaks of a time when *The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened...* This verse has come to life for me today. I have a cousin who is like a brother to me. His name is John. Despite his “younger” age, just had cornea replacement surgery. I know that he was very worried during the time leading up to the surgery. In a short period of time he went from being a healthy person to someone who was almost legally blind, and he was very worried about his future. But so far, it looks like the first surgery has healed well. And even though he is not a believer, he has been humbled by the healing and love that has surrounded him through this process.

I personally am grateful to God for his healing. Just the thought of losing your sight is very traumatic. Now I can imagine the joy that patients felt in El Salvador after Kate Smith and Linda Flanagan and Greg Miller traveled all that way with Eye Care International to help run a temporary eye clinic. They brought a lot of joy to a lot of people in a short amount of time.

One challenge of the Christmas season, and one challenge of the 3rd Sunday in Advent, is that joy is not always universal. The holiday season is very difficult for many people. There might be an empty seat at the table. Holidays can intensify a person's grief and sense of loss. Some people feel shame this time of the year when everyone else is acting happy and they are sad and depressed. Some people feel there is something wrong with them if they don't feel joy during the holidays. But if you feel this way or you know someone who does, please know that these feelings are completely normal. Share your grief with others. I guarantee you that you are not alone.

Even in today's gospel lesson, John the Baptist has a hard time feeling joy. In fact, John has reached a very low point in his ministry. He sends a message to Jesus, asking him "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" John is consumed by doubt. He has come to a point in his ministry when he is questioning it all. He finds himself in prison as a result of his baptizing in the wilderness. He thought he was doing what was right—he was doing what God called him to do, and now he is paying the price in prison. John finds himself in a very dark place. This is not "joy Sunday" for John. It's not even close.

Friends, I hope that you are able to find some hope in the Advent season. Even if you are struggling with loss and grief, please know that you are not alone. Many people feel exactly the way you do. The good news of Advent is *Emmanuel*, which the Gospel of Matthew tells us means "God with us." God is with us now and God will remain with us forever. God is with us in our joy and in our sorrow. God is with us in the darkness and in the light. God is with us no matter how we are feeling, and God will continue to accompany us through whatever lies ahead.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes this promise: *I will be with you always, to the end of the age*. This promise is especially important for us to hear during the season of the year that is the coldest as well as the darkest. Jesus Christ has been with us since the beginning of time and he will be with us until the end, and even beyond that. The Gospel of John gives us words that help us to trust God's presence. John writes, *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*. These are the words from our gospel lesson for Christmas Day, by the way.

God's intent is not to banish all darkness and brokenness from our lives. God's intent is to stay with us in the darkness. May you find hope in the season of Advent and joy in the coming of the Christ child. **Amen.**