

December 13, 2020 – Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, John 1:6-8,19-28

“I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart. I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart to stay.”

Did you know that song dates to 1925? It was written by a Methodist minister named George William Cooke who ran a Christian camp in Delaware. The camp is actually still there, from what I gather. He wrote it as camp song and it has continued to serve that purpose for almost a century. Including for a great many of you.

It's not typically thought of as a Christmas song, though. Or an Advent song, for that matter. But as I was preparing my sermon, I realized that it perfectly fits with our Advent message this morning.

Today is known in the church year as Gaudete Sunday. The third Sunday of Advent, which marks the halfway point in the Advent season. In many churches, it's marked by putting up rose colored paraments around the church, instead of blue or purple. Which is why it's also marked with a rose colored candle on the Advent wreath.

But the name “Gaudete” comes from our Epistle lesson. It's Latin for “rejoice”. As in Paul's command to “*Rejoice always.*” And it's reiterated in our Old Testament lesson. “*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,*” Isaiah tells us. This is the Sunday of Rejoicing. The Sunday of Joy.

As I was thinking about this theme of joy in our lessons today, I realized that this simple camp song made a very good point. Methodist camp songs aren't exactly known for deep theology, but this one actually says something rather important. “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy... down in my heart. Where? Down in my heart.”

Joy comes from the heart. It's not just a state of mind. It's a state of spirit. In fact, Paul himself lists joy among the fruits of the spirit. Alongside of things that we would readily think of as spiritual gifts. Things like love and peace and faithfulness, that we know are gifts of God. Joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is truly down in our heart. And our lessons today reiterate that.

Let's start with that Epistle. Paul may command us to rejoice, but it's not just about feeling good. He also commands us to pray without ceasing. To give thanks in every circumstance. Why? Because this is the will of God for you. And to do otherwise is, as he says, to “quench the Spirit.” Joy, prayer, thankfulness... these are gifts of God. These are his will for us. These are what he provides to us.

Isaiah says something similar. “*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in God.*” Not just his mind. Not just his lips. His soul exults in God. For Isaiah, joy is something that starts on the inside, in his very soul, and works its way out. He's got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in his heart.

Even our Gospel lesson connects to this, in a roundabout way. Not in the text directly. But in the person of John the Baptist. What's the very first thing we hear about John? The very first thing he does in the Bible?

Is it baptize in the wilderness? No. Is it preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins? No. Is it proclaim Jesus to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? No.

John certainly does all of those things. But the very first thing he does, he does before he's even born. Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and John's mother tells her, “*When the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.*”

We often think of John the Baptist as being... well... rather grouchy. Much of his preaching was to rebuke people for their sins. For some, that was a needed wake-up call that led to repentance. For others, it just made him a lot of enemies.

And yet, we can't forget that John's ministry wasn't driven by anger at their sins or sadness at their hard hearts. No, from day one, while he was still in his mother's belly, John's ministry was driven by joy. John leapt for joy in his mother's womb and he continued leaping for joy until the day he died.

Why? What made John leap for joy? What made Isaiah rejoice greatly in the Lord? What convinced St Paul that it was God's will that we should rejoice?

Well, according to Isaiah, something amazing has happened. The poor have received good news. The brokenhearted have had their broken hearts bound up. Liberty has been proclaimed to the captives. The prisoners have been released. Those who mourn shall be glad. And the year of the Lord's favor has been proclaimed.

That's a pretty bold message. And yet, the last I saw, the poor still exist. People still suffer from broken hearts. There are still those who are captive and in prison. Many still mourn the loss of loved ones. And, quite frankly, it doesn't feel much like God's favor is on us at all.

No, we have quite a bit in this world that feels downright depressing. Things that make us sad, angry, even hopeless. Truth be told, there are probably many here this morning who don't feel much joy at all.

But then, we go back to what I said before: Joy isn't just a feeling. Joy is something that comes from the heart. Something that comes from the soul.

It is Isaiah's soul that exults in God. For he has been clothed with the garments of salvation and covered in the robe of righteousness. Isaiah is seeing the world not through human eyes, but through God's eyes. He is seeing a spiritual reality, not a physical reality.

And so the poor have received good news. For those who could not pay the debt of their sin have had that debt paid for them. The captive has received liberty and the prisoner his freedom, because those who were captive to sin and imprisoned by Satan have been given freedom in God's kingdom and the promise of eternal life.

Those who mourn shall be glad. For a day will come when all will rise from the dead and every tear will be wiped from their eyes. And God's favor is upon us. For his light has come into a dark world.

It was seeing that light come into the world, bearing witness to that light coming into the world, that gave John joy. Joy to confront the darkness around him. Joy to make straight the way of the Lord in the midst of a wilderness of sin. Joy to baptize with water for repentance while point forward to the Christ who would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit for forgiveness.

You see, joy – true joy – isn't just a feeling. It isn't just a happy song we sing with our lips for a few minutes. It isn't just the smile we put on our face, either because we're honestly happy or because we just want people to think we are.

No, those aren't joy. Because those are superficial. Those are temporary. If what you've got can be snatched away simply because of something you hear on the news or something someone tells you in a phone call or something the doctor tells you in his office... then it's not joy. It may be a very nice feeling. But it's not joy.

Joy comes from the heart. Joy comes from the soul. Joy comes in the knowledge that your sins are forgiven. That the God of all Creation has come to earth. Has lived, died, and risen again. And has promised you a future without pain or sickness, sin or death. That he has indeed, clothed you in garments of salvation and covered you in the robe of his righteousness. Good news of great joy, for all people, is the message that unto us is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Paul commands us to rejoice. But he doesn't do it because he expects us to always be happy about a sinful world. That's insane. Even Jesus got angry in the face of sin. Even Jesus wept in the face of death.

And yet, even in the midst of anger and sadness and the horrific pain of the cross, Jesus felt joy. It was for the joy set before him that Jesus endured the cross. It was his joy to save you. It is your joy to be saved. This is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

So I do indeed have the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart. Down in my heart to stay. Not because I'm happy or sad. Angry or in pain. No, I have joy in my heart because Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Jesus died and rose again on Easter morning. I have joy because he who called me is faithful. And he will surely come again. Amen.