

TAKE JOY
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December 13, 2015
Third Sunday of Advent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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The lessons for this third Sunday of Advent radiate with joy.

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid, for the LORD is my strength and my salvation. With joy we shall draw water from the wells of salvation. (Isaiah 12:2-6)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. (Phil. 4:4-7)

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart. For the LORD has taken away the judgments against you and has turned away your enemies. The LORD is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. I will renew you in love and exult over you with singing. I will deal with all your oppressors. I will save the lame and gather the outcast. I will bring you home. (Zephaniah 3:14-20)

And then there's the gospel lesson (Luke 3:7-18) that we will get to in just a few minutes.

This morning the Advent candle of joy burns against the darkness that hovers over the world and over our nation casting a shadow upon our hearts. We have reasons to be afraid. The world around us and the world within can be dreadful. But the gloom of the world is only a shadow. Behind it, yet within reach, is joy. Take joy.

Take joy. For in the midst of war, a child is born to us. Lois Violet Wilkinson arrived on Monday. The blessings of birth and new birth astound us. The gloom of war's destruction is but a shadow. Take joy.

One of us recently sat by a father's deathbed. Memories hovered between them—some not so pleasant or happy. But in that moment each spoke words of gentleness. She took his hand. He took hers. The gloom of death is but a shadow. Take joy.

One among us has watched a child descend into the hell of addiction over the course of decades. Gloom hovered over her. She prayed. She worried. Fear filled her heart. And then something happened. Her child recently found the door to freedom. The gloom of addiction is but a shadow. Take joy.

Many in our land are without a home. Many sleep outside in the cold. Some lack daily bread. But some of us prepare a delicious meal every month and share it with those who hunger for food and kindness. We did it last Sunday and we'll do it again next month and the month after that and the month after that. We take a meal. We take time and we receive far more than we give. Take joy.

Some of us prepare a warm place in this church so those that society casts out can come in out of the cold. The gloom of homelessness and hunger hovers over our land. But it's only a shadow. Take joy.

Prominent leaders in our nation speak hatefully of refugees and Muslims. Gloom hovers over our nation and fills the news. But some of us are meeting to find a way to resettle a Syrian refugee family. Our children assembled 25 school kits to send through Church World Service to children in refugee camps and tonight our youth will assemble hygiene kits to send. A couple of us recently invited Muslim neighbors over for dinner.

There is much we can't do. But we can all do something. We can offer hope and compassion. We can choose welcome. The gloom of hate is but a shadow. Take joy.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson. Once upon a time, long ago the messenger cried out in a dark and gloomy time. Repent. Turn around. Bear fruits befitting repentance. Once upon a time is also now—in the midnight clear or in a night dark with fear—a voice cries out.

Repentance is not primarily about guilt and remorse. The word's primary meaning is "to return." Return to the place that you belong. Return to the path of compassion. Do not give in to guilt and despair. The Beloved is forever holding the door open. Repent. We can return time and time again.

But what can we do, some asked the messenger. If you have two coats, share with those who have none. And those who have food do likewise.

What shall we do, asked the toll collectors who were known to be bullies. Take no more than is fair, answered the messenger.

What shall we do, asked soldiers who had the power of the empire behind them? Do not use your power to hurt others, answered the messenger.

And then the lesson ends this way. *And so with many other exhortations the messenger proclaimed the good news, which is to say, the gospel. And what is the gospel truth?*

It's this: No matter how far or often we stray, no matter how far or often we fall, we can repent, we can change, we can be transformed, we can return to the way of health, wholeness, forgiveness and compassion.

We can't do everything in one short day. But we can do something every day. We can practice compassion. For as it turns out, the beautiful Savior we await is already here waiting for us—waiting for us to wake up to joy.

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HYMN
"Joy to the World"