

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 1:6-8,19-28

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

Psalms 126

December 13, 2020

The Third Sunday of Advent

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

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Today, we light the third candle of Advent and reflect upon joy. The light is growing and so is the joy in our heart as we get closer to the birth of Christ.

Let me ask you...What are you joyful for this year? It may be a bit of a stretch to come up with things that we are joyful about right now...that is, if we think about joy based solely upon our current circumstances. If that were the case, we might look at all the things we CAN'T be joyful about.

Yet, this week calls us to a different kind of joy. And...it's the kind of joy that we can't help but claim.

One of my favorite memories of church back when I was growing up was when someone would give their testimony and share what they were joyful about. Now, I know some of you may groan when you hear the word testimony because many of us haven't had a good experience when it comes to someone telling us about their faith. To be clear, often when we think of the idea of a Christian testimony, we think of someone telling us why we should (in evangelistic terms) accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. In that case, the testimony had an end goal...to convert people to the Christian faith. I'm sure you have heard phrases like, give your life to Christ, be born again, accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

That was certainly one way, one intent behind giving a testimony – to convert others to Christ. And, for many people that kind of testimony is the cornerstone of their faith. So, I don't want to diminish that experience in any way. However, I found it to be problematic in one sense...when we come at the idea of testimony (of sharing the joy of our faith) with a singular end goal we make the experience of faith transactional. We define joy as a very narrow opportunity based upon a particular set of criteria. As a result, a whole lot of folks have been left out, felt shamed, unloved, not good enough. Maybe they weren't sure what they believed just yet and felt excluded because they weren't the "right kind" of Christian.

For those folks, hearing a particular kind of testimony provided only a particular kind of faith and I have to say, when that happens there are going to be far too many people who don't see themselves in that box...as in to be loved by God, you have to look like this, or love like this, or believe like this.

So, let's consider this idea of testimony from a different perspective this morning. The kind of testimony that is joy filled, not because we meet a particular set of criteria of belief, but because of God's love, unconditionally, just as we are and that is something we can testify to with joy.

But, first, let's think about the word "testimony." In its most basic definition, a testimony in the Christian sense, is a story someone shares about how God has changed his or her life. The Greek translation for testify means to bear witness, to affirm to what you have seen or heard, especially if it's something that you have seen or heard by divine revelation or inspiration. And, if you testify to something, you are a witness to that belief or event. That's straight forward.

In my experience growing up, when someone gave their testimony, when they witnessed to God's love in their life, it was often more central to our worship than any form of liturgy. It was transforming. It was the power of someone's story of faith brought to bear in the most honest and humble way. When someone could say I want you to know what God has done for me, how God has changed my life, how I have changed because of God's love for me.

These stories were always full of joy. They showed me what it meant to embody faith in real and true ways...ways that brought all of the theology, all of the bible study, all of the sermonizing to bear in a tangible way that I could grasp. What I heard wasn't a linear, transactional kind of faith (as in - you state that you believe this and God will give you that). Instead, it was a rich, life-giving kind of faith that offered something I couldn't find anywhere else in the world. It offered acceptance, forgiveness, strength, and courage. It offered a path to comfort when I was defeated and broken. It offered hope when I was grieving. It offered love when I felt rejected.

It was the kind of joy I wanted in my life.

Our Gospel reading encourages us to be that kind of giver of testimony. It is that kind of giver of testimony that we find this week in John...The witness, the testifier, the one who has joy to share about what is to come and what it will mean for our lives. John testifies deeply and graciously. He wants people to know how special this birth will be. Not for a particular few but for all of us. It is a testimony of reconciliation and forgiveness, of transformation, and of joy.

It made me consider the power of that message. The message of reconciliation and forgiveness and acceptance. How might we testify to that story?

What would it look like if you shared your story? I know...it's not something we are very accustomed to as Episcopalians. But consider this...Consider the times you were so deeply moved by a someone who told you how God changed their life. Consider the times you learned something about yourself in those stories. Maybe it was when someone who looked like you and talked like you told you how much they were loved by God. Could you see yourself in their story?

Maybe you are gay and had been told God did not love you. And, then one day, someone who is also gay told you about how God had reached into their heart and healed their pain, made them feel accepted and cared for, gave them strength to come out to their families. What if

that testimony helped you trust more deeply in God? Just think about how you might share that story with someone else who is seeking to hear they are loved.

Maybe you have been dishonest, made poor choices that you weren't proud of and as a result didn't feel you were worthy to go back into a church. And, then one day, someone who had been down a similar road told you how they finally were able to confess their sins and how they had been forgiven and how their life had turned around because the church accepted them with open arms. And maybe for the first time, as you heard their story you thought you could turn your life around, too. Just think about how you might share that story with someone who is seeking forgiveness.

Maybe you have been caught in deep grief over the loss of a loved one, a spouse or a child, and had turned away from God because you thought God should have saved them. And then, someone shared with you how God slowly and lovingly held them through their own times of grief, that God was weeping along with them for their loss and never faltered in providing comfort. And for the first time, you began to feel a bit of that comfort wash over you. Just think about how you might share that story with someone who is grieving.

Testimony is powerful when we can see ourselves in someone else. When someone who looks like us, acts like us, loves like us, hurts like us, shows us how God loved them through it all. And we begin to consider, maybe that kind of faith is something we can believe in, too. We see that God's love is possible in our own lives. That God's light is shining down on us when we might have felt unworthy of such incredible grace.

That's what joy is all about. It's the kind of joy worth sharing.

So, let me ask you again...what are you joyful for this year? What might your testimony be?

Amen.