

“The Joy That Knows Your Name”

Rev. David Gregory

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Advent 3



Readings

For Joy
Jan Richardson

You can prepare,
but still
it will come to you
by surprise.
crossing through your doorway,
calling your name in greeting,
turning like a child
who quickens suddenly
within you.
It will astonish you
how wide your heart
will open
in welcome
for the joy
that finds you
so ready
and still so
unprepared.

Isaiah 35:8-10
from *the Message* by Eugene Peterson

There will be a highway
called the Holy Road.
No lions on this road,
no dangerous wild animals—
Nothing and no one dangerous or threatening.
Only the redeemed will walk on it.
The people God has ransomed
will come back on this road.
They'll sing as they make their way home to Zion,
unfading halos of joy encircling their heads,
Welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness
as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night.

When I was a child, the season of Advent was irrelevant. It was only about getting to those brightly colored gifts under the tree, particularly the ones with my name on them. Right around Halloween, the long-awaited Sears Christmas catalogue arrived in the mail, and I spent the next few weeks circling *all* the things that I wanted. I had a tiered system, which meant that when I used red ink, I wasn't kidding. And later on, as the gifts began to pile up under the tree, I'd size them up when no one was looking, and spend my days deciding in what order I would open them. The waiting seemed interminable. When you're six or seven years old, the month of December is a much larger percentage of your life than when you're sixty or seventy, when it becomes barely perceptible. If you had said to me back then, "Enjoy the journey," I'd have looked at you cross-eyed. What journey? It's all about the destination.

These days I'm at the age where Christmas shows up really often. Beginning with Halloween, it's just another downhill slide, a saucer sled that's been greased up on the bottom just to make it go faster. (From what I remember, that's a thing.) But one of the great things about growing older is the larger capacity to enjoy and to savor the journey. And so now the joy I find in the Advent season makes Christmas itself a little irrelevant.

Please don't call me Scrooge. I don't dislike the holiday, but it's the *path to it* that holds my attention, my energy, and my focus, and my aspiration is that I can learn to live this way. Like Mary Oliver, I would rather be the bride married to amazement than a traveler bent on getting to the station. I'd rather be a tortoise than a hare. I'd like to spend this season luxuriating in a refreshing pool of prophetic voices, from ancient to post-modern, the ones that give me context for living, devoid of theological propositions, and filled with all the joys of the present moment. As I like to say often, the present moment is where all of life is lived, so if we're going to truly live our lives, we must become present to this moment. And this one. And this one.

Speaking of prophetic voices, the season of Advent is brimming with them. Topping the list are the women: Mary and her cousin Elizabeth in their joyful family reunion, unborn babies leaping in their euphoric wombs; Elizabeth's husband Zacharias, whose doubts left him speechless; Joseph, committed to marrying someone he had his own doubts about, but being willing to wait and listen, and put one foot forward at a time. These prophetic voices don't bring us certainty; they bring us hope. They don't bring us the absence of turmoil; they bring us peace. And for this third Sunday in Advent, they don't bring us swiftly to the next destination; they bring us joy on our journey. They speak of the world we're trying to create, as if it is already here, and whether they knew it or not, these prophets were the co-creators of the world we would inhabit, just as we are co-creating the world that we and those who follow us will find joy in.

In terms of the ancient Hebrew prophets, the first Isaiah ends a dark section of doom and gloom with a huge promise. A group of exiles will be set free, refugees will be "redeemed" from their forty-year homeless encampment in Babylon, one day finally marching down a highway called the "Holy Road" all the way back to their home in Zion where they will be welcomed with gifts of joy and gladness.

The journey to get there will be filled with singing and laughter. Freedom will bring them joy on their way. They won't find their Zion to be as they left it. In fact, they will grieve the losses of their homes, their livelihoods, and their temple, but oh, they will have joy as they approach the next stage, the one where they begin to rebuild, which won't be so much a rebuilding as it is the creation of something new.

So here we are with this candle we call "Joy," as if to say we're here to create something new ourselves. We're on this journey of creation, and it's not about the final product, because no product is ever final. It's about the pleasure of creative energy, the brightness of something beautiful that begins as an idea and becomes a thing. Advent itself is a human creation. It didn't come from an oracle, handed down from on high. It grew out of the church of the fifth and sixth centuries as a season of fasting and preparation for Christmas, which was itself a construct. We don't really know when Jesus was born, and we certainly cannot say that he left instructions for how to celebrate his birthday. There are nativity stories in the gospel portraits, for sure, but they differ in their details, their context, and their meaning. They need not be harmonized; it's pointless. They don't exist for the creation of dogma. They are here to open us to experience. They speak of ancient peoples who tried to express things that were inexpressible, and for this reason I love them. They inspire me to explore my own imperfect ways of communicating transcendence, with words that have meaning for me and my generation. And five hundred years from now, when some artificial intelligence speaks a question into a highly conscious search engine, someone will find the words of this sermon in a dusty old file, and they'll say, "Wasn't that quaint! I guess he was doing the best with what he had." I love being part of this chain of human existence. It brings me great joy!

This poem we read today by Jan Richardson was a contributed by Richard Flout to our Advent Reader, and it shaped my thinking this week, and my approach to this day. We think we are prepared for the joy of living. We spy the presents under the tree and we say to ourselves, "What a joy it will be to have the things that we want. What a privilege it is to receive the love that comes wrapped up with them, to count our blessings, to enumerate the gifts of our lives and to be thankful." But if that is as far as we get, we've missed nearly all of it. There are times when the bright packages are few. There are seasons when we feel alone. There are moments when the blessings are hard to find amid the struggles and defeats of the moment. And that is when we become astonished at the joy that comes to find us, like a finely dressed guest that knocks on your door when your house is a mess and the dishes are dirty. You don't ask this joy to go away and come back later. You open wide your heart and receive it, because nothing else matters.

The candle of joy is that unexpected guest. May it glow within us. May it enliven us with transcendence. May it bring us laughter in whatever exile we find ourselves. May it lighten our steps as we find our way back to Zion. Rejoice greatly!

