

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: December 13, 2020 Year B, Advent 3

Text: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Title: Choosing Joy

Focus: "Choosing joy" is a robust, defiant, determined, faith-filled act that is another way to be a part of "Those Who Dream."

Pictures to include:

Bridget

Her son Ari, with the *Tastebuds* sign on closing day



Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Though the people had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, they continued to face hardship and oppression. In the language of the jubilee year described in Leviticus 25, the prophet, moved by the spirit of the Lord, announces deliverance for those who are oppressed and comfort for those who mourn.

A reading from Isaiah.

- ¹The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
- ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
- ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
- ⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

⁸For I the Lord love justice,
 I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
 I will faithfully give them their recompense,
 and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
 and their offspring among the peoples;
 all who see them shall acknowledge
 that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
 my whole being shall exult in my God;
 for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
 he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
 as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
 and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
 so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
 to spring up before all the nations.

More Bad News

Earlier this week I had to share bad news with you all. Maybe “Bad News” is not the best name to describe it, but it was sad news of losses that we are experiencing. I sent an email to the congregation on Monday with the notice of the deaths of three members of the congregation that (as of the time I wrote on Monday), have occurred within the last 10 days:

- Longtime member **Joan Rodican** on Thanksgiving morning, Thursday, November 26.
- Most unexpectedly, the death of **Pr. Jack Ericson** on last Sunday, December 6. Pastor Jack served this congregation from 1973-1984. His beloved wife Shirley died September 29.
- The next death was on Monday of longtime member **Ed Anderson**.

This is not easy news to share. It saddens all of us. One of the things I wanted to include in the notification was to provide a mailing address for each of the families of those who have died and suggest to church folks that they send a greeting card of condolence. Particularly when we are restricted from physically gathering, it is important both **for people to tell stories** and share memories and also for **family members to hear those stories**. At least for right now, we don't have the usual opportunities to gather for a memorial service and reception where we can get together to hear words of hope from scripture and tell stories and comfort one another. All those things happen formally within a memorial service and continue through the informal conversations that take place at the reception. As I said about including the mailing address of family members, gathering and telling stories and sharing memories is healing for us to tell and healing for family to hear.

Good News in the Isaiah text

Last week, we focused on John the Baptist and his role as Messenger. It was his job to deliver God's message. In today's reading from Isaiah and in Mark's description of John's witness to Jesus as the Messiah, we have additional echoes reminding us of that call. In Isaiah, the immediate context of that call would have been their own experience of exile, of still longing for a better day and recognizing that God was sending that messenger to proclaim good news. The prophet describes his call in this way:

¹The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
 and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. . . (Isaiah 61)

That setting of exile is one with which we can identify. Ironically, while exile is primarily about being removed from one's home or homeland or being forced by conditions to leave home, we are living with a disruption or disorientation that isolates us by restricting us to being *at home*.

So, like the Israelite exiles longing for good news, we too are waiting and longing for good news. **If the bulk of the news we receive seems like "bad news," how are we sustained while we wait for good news?**

Gaudete Sunday

You likely have noticed that today I am wearing this pink dress shirt. Most of the time during our time of physical, in-person worship ("nearly always," I would say), I would lead worship wearing a robe or alb along with a pastor's stole. Underneath, I'd wear a dress shirt or a clergy collar shirt.

Most of the time during COVID-separation, I have led worship wearing a clergy collar shirt alone with a stole with no robe or alb. Wearing the clergy collar shirt rather than a robe has just seemed more fitting for this time. So today is different.

Today is the 3rd Sunday of the season of Advent, which is associated with the word "Joy" and is traditionally called Gaudete (**GOW-day-tay**) Sunday. Gaudete is a Latin word meaning *rejoice*. Gaudete is also the word from which we get the English *gaudy*, to mean something exceptionally bright or colorful. Though many churches have switched from purple/violet candles for Advent to royal blue, the traditional color for the 3rd Sunday of Advent is pink or rose. *Point out the rose-colored candle in the Advent wreath.*

The switch from purple or violet to blue is to distinguish Advent from the purple of Lent, which suggests a more penitential, reflective mood. Advent has that mood or tone, too, but the royal blue recalls the kingly nature of Jesus, the hoped-for messiah. The pink or rose color suggests the joy that breaks in at the coming of Jesus and into the sometimes-somber season of Advent.

Choosing Joy

So, in a way, adopting joy is an intentional choice. “Choosing Joy” is a defiant declaration—it is a faith-filled declaration that even in spite of unfavorable circumstances, we will choose joy. It is a robust, defiant, determined, faith-filled act. “Choosing Joy” is to be a dreamer in the sense that we talked about last week. To be a dreamer is not to disconnect from the real world, but to have a vision or sense of what the world should be or what God intends for the world to be and then to work towards that dream or vision. “Choosing Joy” is to act in such a way that it is not just to wistfully long for a better day, but to actively take steps toward that.

Though we long for **good news**, we can’t create or manufacture it or declare it to be so right now, as if we had a magic wand. We can’t immediately change circumstances or create happiness, but we can choose joy. I hear joy imbedded in the promise of the text from Isaiah. . .

The prophet is honest. The prophet speaks the truth about how things are right now--circumstances are not what people would wish:

- People are brokenhearted (v. 1)
- They are stuck, feeling imprisoned, held captive (v. 2)
- They are mourning (vv. 2, 3)
- They are feeling faint or weak (v. 3)

The honesty of the prophet about present circumstances could be summed up by declaring something like “This stinks!” And we could all probably pick something a little more colorful than “This stinks!” to describe what that exile circumstance is like—whether that is the exile experience of the Israelites or our own.

It stinks. We don’t like it. It stinks that we had 3 congregation members die within a week and a half. It stinks that Jack died so soon after Shirley. It stinks that Jack died so suddenly that we didn’t get that chance to have one more conversation. It stinks that we’re not able to physically gather to say goodbye to each of these people. It stinks that COVID positivity, hospitalization, and death numbers continue at this alarmingly high level. It stinks that at a time when we most want to and need to meet in person, we also recognize that it is not wise to do so. It stinks that across the country, governors and public health officials and leaders in particular segments of society are having to devise operating plans with provisions that are like tightrope-walking to try to balance both public health concerns and economic stability. There seem to be only lose-lose choices. It stinks.

The prophet is honest in saying that it stinks.

And yet the prophet chooses joy as he affirms that despite the present stinky circumstances, God is present with them. (See Isaiah 61:10-11).

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness. . .

The prophet trusts that God will be like a garden which reliably produces good crops.

Tastebuds: A real-life Story of Choosing Joy

So, moving from the text and the affirmation about God's ability to cause things to grow, what does it look like in "real life" to be undergirded by joy or to "Choose Joy?" What would it be like demonstrate joy even while things are truly "stinky" and it would be easier to get bogged down in a state of hopelessness?

I read a story this week of discovering and choosing joy even in the midst of overwhelming loss:¹

- *Show the picture slide with owner Bridget & her son Ari holding the Tastebuds sign*

Bridget McGinty is the former chef and owner of Tastebuds, a landmark restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio, for 19 years. She built the business and her clientele from the ground up.

After COVID pandemic restrictions hit in March, they temporarily closed for a month while they did their best to figure out how to adapt their original sit-down concept to a model that could be viable in the new reality. They had prided themselves on personalized attention to develop regular customers and now, though the new model was not what they would otherwise choose, they had to consider things like simplifying and scaling down their menu and online ordering and delivery services.

Her original vision was "to prove that you could lead a kitchen with love and kindness and still be successful." She said that "Seeing our regulars is what got us out of bed every day, or the absolute joy of welcoming new customers and hearing that they will be back."

While they struggled to adapt, a number of external factors continued to pummel them left and right.

- PPP loans dried up (Federal Payroll Protection Program loans from the CARES Act.)
- Schools closed, forcing Bridget and her sister and business partner to scramble again
- Support programs with restrictive conditions didn't fit her circumstance.
- She called her landlord to explain their inability to pay rent. Though he was willing to work with them, it became clear that they would not have income for several months and would never be able to catch up on the rent. They landlord suggested they sell.

She reached out to her parish priest Father Mark of St. Michael's for help on a personal matter other than the restaurant. Then she told him about *Tastebuds* as well.

¹ The following is excerpted from Bridget McGinty's story "Faced with having to close my restaurant, I was given a great gift."¹ Posted on CNN.org Tues. December 8, 2020.
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/08/opinions/tastebuds-restaurant-closing-pandemic-gift-mcginty/index.html>

- “He asked me how I was doing, and of course, I told him the truth. It was the first time I could stop pretending I was ok. I didn't have to be brave or strong for him. Father Mark wasn't a business partner, or employee or customer. He listened, and I could hear his heart breaking. He said he would pray for us.”

She wrote, “Later that day, he sent a text saying that if we have to liquidate, please consider St. Michael Archangel Church as a potential buyer. He explained that they had applied for grant money to renovate a hall and commercial kitchen to better serve the community.”

Though they had interest from potential buyers, she and her sister agreed they could not sell Tastebuds in good faith. A new owner, even when buying assets for pennies on the dollar, would likely still find success elusive.

They began to acknowledge the painful and shocking reality that Tastebuds, a landmark restaurant in Cleveland for 19 years was not going to make it. They decided to see what equipment St. Michael's might want to buy.

After meeting Father Mark for a tour of the kitchen, which was badly in need of renovation., they met the couple who have run the food pantry and kitchen for over 36 years. Through partnering with the Cleveland Food Bank a small team of dedicated volunteers was using this dilapidated kitchen and its half-broken equipment to provide food to an average of 350 food-insecure families per week and serve almost 300 hot meals per month.

Through other outreach programs, of St. Michael's assisted those afflicted by drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, marital strife, and extreme poverty.

In her own words, she writes,

“Erin and I left the church feeling humbled and inspired. We had been so powerless for so long and suddenly we were in a position to do something tremendous. We didn't even have to discuss it. We were no longer considering what we could sell to the church, we were donating anything and everything we could. We felt strangely, that we were being given a great gift. We were being given the power to write our own ending, and to make it a happy one.”

“The cruelty of Covid-19 has left us all alone to grieve the loss of a loved one, or a dream, or a way of life. Tastebuds was all of those things to me.”

“It seems, at the time we need it the most, we cannot wrap our arms around each other and be made to feel better. I took solace in the selfless actions of the many volunteers from St. Michael's. . . There was joy in their hearts, and it found its way into mine.”

“I felt proud and privileged to have found a way to close my business that brought joy to people, a way that removed all the anger and bitterness from my heart.”

“I encourage business owners and restaurateurs that see no way to remain open, to finish strong. If you think it's the end for your business, see if you can be somebody else's beginning.”

Thank you to Bridget of *Tastebuds* for Choosing Joy.