

Great Expectations of Joy
Isaiah 12:2-6
NUCC Traditional – Advent Music Sunday
16 December 2018

Introduction:

There is a part of the Christmas narrative that I particularly love. Yes, I love the image of Mary telling her cousin Elizabeth that she is pregnant and the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaping for joy. Yes, I love the image of Mary & Joseph making a place in a spare room, perhaps a barn, as they prepared to become parents in a land unfamiliar to them.

But the part that I love the most about the Christmas narrative is the part that describes angels telling the shepherds about the birth of Jesus. And there are two reasons: (1) I find it compelling that the annunciation occurred to ordinary people, and you could not have been more ordinary than a shepherd. . (2) The angels told the shepherds about the birth of Jesus through song.

Now as someone whose ministry is through words, it can be hard to admit that the spoken word is not always the ultimate authority on all things spiritual. But, as I often say to the choir, it is music that most often ushers me into the presence of God. It is as if I am the common shepherd that night and a "multitude of the heavenly host" surrounds me and begins to explain the goodness of God.

And so, I invite you this morning to sit in your pew, hear the sounds of angels as they once again proclaim the Christmas message.

Meditation

Isaiah 12:2-6 (NRSV):

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

In his book, *Talking to Ducks*, James A. Kitchens explains there are two major types of joy: internal joy and external joy. Internal joy comes from within, but external joy comes and goes with whatever is happening in our environment. It is extrinsic because it arises from the outside. When the circumstances change in one direction, joy comes. When fortune reverses, joy leaves. Internal joy stays with us regardless of our external circumstances.

I recently read about the night that darkness descended on New York City during the blackout of 2003. It was a chaotic night, you may remember. Manhattan, including Wall Street and the United Nations, was completely shut down, as were all area airports and all rail transportation including the subway.

However, there was one exception to that darkness. It happened at a restaurant where people were lined up to get hot food. It was reported that in this dark situation there was this one place with all this light and joy and music and laughter and excitement. The assistant manager was asked: “It’s dark everywhere. The airport is right over there and it’s dark. Everything is dark, and yet you are lit up like a Christmas tree. How can this be?”

The manager said, “It’s really fairly simple. When we built this [place], we built it with a gas generator. We’ve got power on the inside that is not determined by

circumstances on the outside. Even though there's nothing happening out there, there's plenty happening in here."

And so, this Christmas, I ask myself the same question I ask you: **Is your joy from within or without?** Is how you feel about God, the world, your faith and yes, the holiday season, determined by external forces that weigh you down or by the joy that wells up inside?

I'll confess – I can get bogged down in a world where there are families and children at the border trying to escape the atrocities of their native countries while maneuvering the complexities of our immigration laws. And where a gunman enters a synagogue of faithful worshipers. And where cancer and HIV/AIDS still take too many lives, and people must say goodbye to those they love too soon. A world where petty disputes erode relationships and family disagreements can last decades. But those are external factors and God has given us so much more.

In response, let us reach for something more. Let us experience not only the joy of this season, but the joy of life and the joy of our faith. Let us breathe in the goodness of God and experience a kind of joy that cannot be easily taken from us.

As John Rutter writes in our next anthem:

"Brothers, let us celebrate the birth of the Jesus child,
Sisters, come and welcome him, the newborn King;
Praise the Lord who sent him down from heaven at Christmas time;
Young and old and rich and poor, his praises sing."