

December 13, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

Responsive Psalm 126

One: When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.

All: Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

One: Then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

All: The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

One: Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.

All: Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.

One: Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow,

All: they will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Isaiah 52: 1a, 5-10

Awake, awake,

put on your strength, O Zion!

Put on your beautiful garments,

O Jerusalem, the holy city.

⁵ Now therefore what am I doing here, says the Lord, seeing that my people are taken away without cause? Their rulers howl, says the Lord, and continually, all day long, my name is despised. ⁶ Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains

are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,

who brings good news,

who announces salvation,

who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

⁸ Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,

together they sing for joy;

for in plain sight they see

the return of the Lord to Zion.

⁹ Break forth together into singing,

you ruins of Jerusalem;

for the Lord has comforted his people,

he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰ The Lord has bared his holy arm

before the eyes of all the nations;

and all the ends of the earth shall see

the salvation of our God.

Luke 2:8-20

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am

bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This is the Word of the Lord | Thanks be to God

Message: Good News, Great Joy

Our Scriptures readings are joyfully noisy today,
like a good party or a chaotic Christmas morning.
[In the Psalm, there’s laughter and celebration,
tears at leaving turned to songs of joy upon returning
– it sounds almost like a dancing, singing, parade!]

In Isaiah, the cry goes out to wake up! Get ready!
There’s so much movement and excitement:
a messenger, running swiftly toward the city,
spotted by sentinels stationed on the city walls,
who begin to sing for joy.
Soon the whole city is singing and shouting
in celebration and joy together.

And in the familiar story of shepherds and angels,
the quiet of the night is disrupted
by a whole host of angels,
singing and celebrating;
the shepherds go to Bethlehem
and then take up the angel’s song,
glorifying and praising God.

And what has inspired all this noisy, energetic joy?
Being told about salvation, about God saving us.
Hearing the good news of what God has done
is too good to be quietly noted.
Anyone who hears it seems compelled

to joyfully, noisily
 acknowledge it,
 to use voice and body and heart
 to praise God
 and share
 his act of salvation.

But joy seems to be...a little unexpected,
 as a reaction,
 given the places and situations
 that Isaiah is speaking into
 and the shepherds are living in.
 A city doesn't place sentinels on its walls to keep a look out
 unless something is expected to happen:
 are they keeping watch for the good news
 or keeping an eye out for trouble?
 Well, Jerusalem is in ruins,
 so it could be either!

Clearly the enemy has been through at some point,
 whether that enemy was an attacking army
 or simply the decay caused
 by the passing of time and a lack of care.
 The city of God's people is in ruins.
 Not the kind of place we'd expect to be
 capable of mustering up much joy.

Neither would we expect in the night-watches of the shepherds.
 Keeping watch over a flock by night was not for the faint-of-heart;
 it must've been hard, tiring work,
 made harder and more anxious
 by the possibility of predators,
 moving unseen in the dark,
 circling around the vulnerable sheep.

The shepherds were working men;
 not priests, not scholars, not landowners,
 doing a necessary but not very respectable job
 for little payment and less respect.

These rough-and-tumble shepherds
 are a strange choice to receive kingly news,
 and it's stranger still to expect them to

grasp the broader significance of Jesus the baby-Messiah.

So why is everyone so joyful about the good news of salvation?
 I mean, the angels practically demand that the shepherds respond with joy!
 Surely, salvation has come too late for ruined Jerusalem,
 and surely it's too soon for the shepherds
 to recognise Jesus as their Saviour-King...
 ...he's only a baby sleeping in a barn, after all.
 Why does everyone instantly burst out
 in noisy joy?

Since it's Christmas, let's dig a little deeper into the story of the shepherds.

Although these were likely pretty tough men,
 accustomed to facing down wolves in the dark
 and defending their flock from prowling human thieves,
 what caught them off-guard and frightened them
 was not a challenge or a threat,
 but an angel
 and the radiant glory of the Lord.

The shepherds received the message
 of the good news of great joy for all people.
 And even though they'd been frightened,
 the shepherds didn't hesitate to cut short their night shift
 and go to Bethlehem to see for themselves;
 not because they wanted proof
 or didn't believe...
 ...but because they did believe!

The trip from field to baby is not described in the Gospel.
 But if you've ever gone for a walk in the dark
 in the woods or in the countryside somewhere,
 you'll know how difficult it is to walk quickly
 when you can't see very far ahead.

Their route was likely uneven,
 meandering and full of hazards,
 unseen until stumbled over.
 I wonder if the sheep went too –
 they couldn't have safely left them behind!
 And I wonder how they found
 Mary and Joseph at all!

There were many mangers in Bethlehem,
and no one would've been awake in the dead of night
to offer them directions,
even if someone miraculously knew
which stable they were sheltering in.
We must assume divine intervention of some sort,
because they did find Jesus:
lying in a manger, wrapped in cloth,
just as the angel had said.

The shepherds had quite a night.
They abandoned their work at an inconvenient time,
swiftly travelled a dark and treacherous route,
met their infant Saviour,
and then became the first evangelists, the first preachers,
sharing the good news with everyone they met,
as the sun rose on a new day.
Quite a night, for the shepherds,
full of emotion,
from terror
to wild, celebratory joy.

Joy does seem to be the expected response
when the good news is received.
And that must mean that joy
is an essential part of being Christian;
good news means great joy,
and we've all heard the good news
of God's salvation.

But joy is a little more complicated than that, isn't it?
Joy is hard to find in ourselves some days...
...or some months...or some years.

The way we usually celebrate Christmas is such
a whirlwind of get-togethers, church services,
family, present-buying, meals and travelling,
full of expectation
and hard-core planning and scheduling.

And often, as we get older,
there's an undercurrent of sadness there, too,
because of who's missing,
and even a sense of disappointment

because Christmas is never quite
as perfectly joyful
as we try to make it every year.

And this year, there's the added struggle and disappointment
of not doing all the things we think are needed
for a joy-filled celebration,
the added grief of too many losses this year for us all.
Joy is essential,
but joy is also complicated.

And yet, if joy is indeed what happens
when we receive the good news of Jesus,
then that means that joy must be possible for us.
And since the good news does not get less good,
our joy should never be less, either.
Not just at Christmas...all year round.

So joy must be a real possibility for us, as Christians.
You know, maybe that should be a question, instead of a statement;
shall we try it that way instead?
Especially this year,
is joy a real possibility for us?
What do you think?

When I hear the word "joy,"
I think of a sort of fizzy, happy feeling,
when everything's going really well,
when there are exciting things worth celebrating
or when something praise-and-thanks worthy
and wonderful has happened.
Does that come close to your definition of joy, too?
But that kind of joy doesn't really work here;
our shepherds are not likely to be feeling
particularly fizzy after tromping through the dark all night,
searching from stable to stable;
nor did their joy leave them
once their mission was accomplished
and the baby had been seen.
No, even after that, after the main event,
they're still full of joy,
glorifying and praising God as they go back to work.
So perhaps our definition of joy needs some work.

Going back to the original ancient Greek word used for joy,
 the word that the Gospel writers chose,
 points us in a different direction.
 That word for joy means grace recognised;
 it means to see God's grace for what it is,
 and to experience it.

If joy is grace recognised,
 then joy really is both essential and possible for us as Christians...
 ...but it's not so complicated anymore.
 Joy is not finding the silver lining on the storm cloud;
 it's not being happy or smiling all the time.
 Joy doesn't need everything to go well all the time,
 because the burden of our joy
 does not rest on us.

Joy is grace recognised, and grace is about God.

Grace is the love of God, shown to the unlovely.
 It's the peace of God, given to the broken and restless.
 It's the blessing of forgiveness and abundant life,
 poured out upon the undeserving.

Grace is something that we know we need *most*
 when we are in the midst of darkness;
 the kind of darkness that is full of unseen predators, circling round us,
 the kind of darkness that makes for treacherous travelling,
 full of invisible hazards for us to stumble over.

The good news the angels proclaimed
 was the good news of God's grace
 coming into the world, being poured out for us all,
 through Jesus.
 The great joy was the awareness of that grace,
 seeing it and experiencing it,
 and recognising it for the saving gift that it is.
 Joy is grace recognised.

Once that new definition sinks in,
 we get a new perspective on some old familiar things.
 Take, for example, the great Christmas hymn, Joy to the World,
 that end of the Christmas Eve service favourite:
 Joy to the World; the Lord is come!

Let earth receive its King!
 Let every heart prepare Him room,
 and Heaven and nature sing.

It's more than a big, celebratory, praise-filled hurray for the birth of Jesus,
 although it's certainly that, too.
 But that first line is also a wake-up shout of see and experience
 the out-pouring of God's grace to the world;
 proclaiming that the Lord is come and why.

And since we're on the topic of shepherds today,
 remember that parable that Jesus will one day tell
 about a shepherd who has 99 sheep safely in the field,
 but goes out seeking and searching,
 looking every place, as long as it takes,
 until he finds just one lost sheep.
 And then he carries it home,
 and Jesus tells us that there is rejoicing
 – praise-filled recognition of grace outpoured –
 over one lost sheep rescued.

This is joy;
 not a feeling or an emotion,
 something we have to work up or find in ourselves.

Joy is grace recognised for what it is:
 God's saving plan begun by Jesus' birth
 and brought to fulness in his death and resurrection.
 In our most painful losses, our hardest years,
 our deepest darkness,
 that's where we discover how powerful and deep
 joy can be;
 that's where grace
 is most readily seen;
 and that's where grace is needed the most.

But we might still be finding the joy of the shepherds and angels
 a little hard to take
 in this most difficult of years.
 And even in better years,
 reading about that first encounter
 with the good news and great joy
 in the gospel of Luke
 is more like a remembrance of joy

than a new experience of it.

Perhaps it's a little easier to identify with Jerusalem,
the city in ruins from our reading from Isaiah.

We stand, waiting and hoping;
we post sentinels atop our ruined walls,
who gaze outward toward the mountains,
eyes sharp and focused,
looking for something to save us.
It's a powerful image for Advent
in the 21st century.

But the moment those sentinels spot the good news coming over the horizon,
Jerusalem, the city of God's people,
still in ruins,
breaks forth in joyful singing.

Still in ruins,
they are given good news of great joy,
of God's comfort and salvation.
And still in ruins,
they bear witness to joy,
as they recognise the gracious outpouring
of God's salvation
to all the cities and nations of the world.

During the children's story,
I said that joy comes in unexpected places.
But I think we've proved me wrong!

Joy,
the awareness and experience of God's grace,
comes into and belongs in every place and every moment:
in dark places and worship-filled spaces;
in sad moments and in warm, happy ones.

So is joy a possibility for us this year?
Although we might be a little short
on the usual fun and festive parts of Christmas this year,
yes, it is still a joyful Christmas.
The grace brought into this world by Jesus is undiminished,
even in these ever-darker days,
that grace is still lighting up the world,
pouring out hope and wholeness,

love and forgiveness, into our lives.

And that is good news and great joy for us all.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.