

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Perth
Sunday, December 17th, 2023
Rev. Gerry Gallant

Joy
Third Sunday of Advent
Acts 2:46-47

Welcome

Announcements

Call to Worship

The Lord, your God, is in your midst.

Let us sing out loud and shout our praises!

God rejoices over you with gladness and renews you with love.

We will rejoice with all our hearts at what the Lord has done!

With joy, draw water from the well of salvation in this time of worship.

God is our salvation; we will trust and have no fear.

Prayer of Adoration and Invocation

God of Joy and Justice,

We will always rejoice in you.

You are our strength and our song.

You gather those who have strayed from you and welcome them back to your side.

You bring healing to those who are broken in body and spirit,
and draw close to those who walk alone.

Through your great love and mercy,
you transform us all into more than we ever thought we could be.

We will trust in you and not be afraid.

With joy, we sing of your glory
and proclaim your saving power to those near and far.

Receive our prayers and praise this day,
for you alone are worthy, God most holy. **Amen.**

Advent Candle Lighting

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world;
the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life."

We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ.

[Candle Lighter]

The LORD says to his servant,
 “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob
 and to restore the survivors of Israel;
 I will give you as a light to the nations,
 that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
 —from Isaiah 49:6, NRSV

Come, Lord Jesus, our light, and our salvation.

Let us walk in the light of the Lord

Choir Performance

Call to Confession

Prepare the way of the Lord!
 Let us make our confession to God.

Prayer of Confession

**All knowing God,
 We know perfect joy only comes through faith in you,
 yet we seek it out in lesser ways.
 In search of comfort, we indulge our desires.
 In search of love, we hide from our faults.
 In search of approval, we spend beyond our means.
 Forgive us, O God, for seeking satisfaction in the wrong places.
 Help us turn again to you, our true source of joy,
 and guide us to discover what is honorable, just, and pleasing in your sight. Amen.**

Assurance of Pardon

Almighty God, by whose providence
 our Savior, Jesus Christ, came among us in great humility,
 will sanctify you with the light of his blessing and set you free from all sin

The Lord’s Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
 Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One.
 For Thine is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory,**

Forever and ever. Amen.

Responsive Reading

Isaiah 61:8-11

⁸ For I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;

I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

**⁹ Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge them,
that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed.**

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

**¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.**

Prayer for illumination (Congregant Prepared)

Scripture

Acts 2:46-47

⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Sermon

Throughout all of history humankind's biggest challenge has been in overcoming the challenges we face just living out our lives upon the earth. Humankind has faced food shortages, famines and draughts, violence and wars, and the constant class struggle between those who live in excess and those who struggle to simply survive another day.

If you were to look at the news today you could only come to one conclusion, we have not done a very good job of solving these problems. Today we have all of the same problems that the earliest of humankind faced and now we are adding on a whole new list of social and psychological problems that only seem to get worse, never better.

The same could be said about humanity's search for happiness and joy in their lifetime. Throughout our history humankind has tried everything imaginable, everything that is self-pleasing-self-gratifying, and self-fulfilling possible, all focused on the pleasures of sin and the happiness and joy that is felt while in the depths of sin. The problem is that it is not slowing down, in fact it continues to go further and further into the depths of self-satisfaction and din and further and further away from God.

What we should be learning from this is that humanity's solution to happiness and sin have not been successful, instead the rabbit hole keeps getting deeper and deeper and the eternal question of, 'How do I find happiness' just moves further and further away from the secular world.

Ironically, the early church knew what they had discovered was exactly what the secular world was so desperately searching for, from the first time they heard the Gospel, from the first time they truly believed in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, from the first time they repented and began to walk in the way of the Lord, they turned away from the secular world's futile quest for joy and happiness, because they had found a joy that can only be found when you live in relationship with the Lord and with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Acts 2:46-47

⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

This is how the early church is described. A church filled with Joy! A church filled with fellowship. A church filled with the Word of God, bringing God's people together to do his work as the Salt and Light of the world.

Joy was a characteristic of the early church as we can see in the book of Acts, and it is something that has reappeared in the church throughout the ages, during the reformation it flourished once again, and it appears whenever there is a strong revival in faith in churches all over the world.

Yet, this is not the church that many people in the world picture when they picture the Christian church. Instead, the secular world sees the church as a grinch, an organization that is seeking to take away all the things that they gain pleasure from in this world. They have labeled the church as killjoys, sticks-in the muds and generally unhappy, uptight and arrogant

people who only seek to through negativity on those who do not live up to the church's standards.

The secular world believes that the church is filled with narrow minded, phobic people, who live miserable and boring lives characterized more by the things that they are not allowed to do, than by the things that they do. They cannot understand how any Christian can find any enjoyment in a life that is not filled with the pleasures of sin.

The issue is that this perception of the church by the secular world is not without merit. There are many secular people who look upon people who call themselves Christians and see them trying to live a life and fulfill duties not out of a sense of Service, but instead out of a sense of obligation. They see people calling themselves Christians trying to live a life according to a set of rules so that they can get themselves into heaven.

This legalistic view of the Christian faith is what dominates the minds of many who profess the faith and yet do not live in relationship with God. They see God's Word as a rulebook, where they can squeeze a little sinful pleasure out of their life if they can just find a loophole in the rules.

It is because they do not live in relationship with God, they do not love him first with all heart, body, soul, and mind that they miss out on the blessing of Joy that God grants his people in this life. The Jews describe this as 'L'chaim' which means 'to life', living a life of Freedom and joy in God.

The early Church was filled with 'L'chaim'. Their life was filled with joy and happiness as they focused on the singular purpose of their life, worshiping and praising God, and walking as the Salt and Light of his Word in this world, loving their neighbor and even their enemies as they loved themselves.

When Paul wrote to the church in Phillipis he told them.

Philippians 4:4-9

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

The Apostle Peter told the church that they would face trials and tests, but they were to hold strong in their faith and rejoice in their salvation.

1 Peter 1:6-9

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

A church that is not filled with the joy of the Lord in its members is just an earthly organization and has nothing in common with the early church that was started by those who walked with Jesus. A Church without Joy does not understand the life that God is calling for Christians to live in this world.

The early Church did not sway people to join it in the Roman ages, which were filled with sin and debauchery by going out and imposing their laws upon the people who were living sin filled lives, seeking out joy and happiness in their own self-focused pleasure.

The same way that the church today will not sway a secular society that is moving further and further into the rabbit hole of sin and debauchery by imposing laws and regulations on those who do not believe.

Instead, what kept the early church alive and vibrant in a society that was seeking to destroy it was a shared love of God and fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ. It was the Holy Spirit of God, moving through the lived-out Gospel message of those who walked as the Salt and Light of Christ's Word in the world, that filled the church with joy and happiness. It was the early Christians living 'L'chaim' that made the secular world curious about how those who did not take part in their quest for joy and happiness in sin, could be living lives that were so full of joy and happiness.

This is why Christians need to understand the word and concept of joy differently than the secular world. The secular world has taken the words joy and happiness and twisted them into their own self-centered meaning and understanding.

The secular world believes it is the expert on what bring people joy in their lives. In fact, we have whole areas of business, marketing, branding, and sales that use media to try to convince us that their product will bring joy and happiness into the lives of those who are so desperately seeking it.

Wear this brand, have this purse, wear these shoes, drive this car, own this phone or that computer, if you do this you will gain the respect and envy of the secular world, you will find the person of your dreams and everything in your life will be filled with joy and happiness. In

marketing they call it 'selling the dream'. Yet we all know the truth, that joy and happiness only lasts a short time, the brand goes out of style, the purse gets old, the shoes are broken down by the weather, the car gets a few dings and starts to rust, the phone or computer is replaced by a new one every year, and the joy and happiness disappear as you are no longer the envy of others, at least until you buy a new one and the whole process starts all over again.

Or how about the idea that you can drink this drink, try this drug, enjoy this fleshly pleasure and you will always have a good time. So, you try it, and it is a good time, until you end up hugging a toilet bowl, in a jail cell, or a hospital, and then the good times do not seem so good anymore.

The world concept of joy and happiness are all based on worldly experiences, things that are artificial, a make-believe kind of joy and happiness. The problem with the secular world's idea of joy and happiness is that it does not work unless you add something from this world into it, and then it is only fleeting as the book of Ecclesiastes teaches us.

The secular world's definition of joy and happiness is all based on circumstances. Their happiness is based upon something that they just happened to discover in this world. In fact, the root of the word Happiness is 'hap' which means by chance.

By chance people discover that having a drink, or trying a drug, or some fleshly pleasure brings them happiness. It starts off simple, and then they begin to discover that it takes more and more drinks, more or stronger drugs, more perverse pleasures of the flesh to reach that same happy place they found the first time. This is how addiction works, and what started out as something fun and enjoyable turns into a life filled with seeking the next form of pleasure so that you can squeeze out a little joy and happiness in your life.

The difference between the world definition of joy and happiness and the Christians definition of joy and happiness, is that the Christian does not go out into the world to seek joy and happiness, instead they go to their heart and their love of God. It is reverence for God and God's Word, a love for God that extends beyond our own selfish love for ourselves that bring joy and happiness into the heart of God's people, that is what brings them 'L'chaim.'

The early church knew this!

Acts 2:42-45

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

The Holy Spirit filled them, they were reborn, they changed from the self-centered selfish people they were into the selfless, Godly focused people that God called them to be. This rebirth, this change in character filled them with a new joy and happiness that was not based

upon the things of this world, but instead was based upon their relationship with God and serving him in this world.

Paul was trying to teach this to the Ephesians in his letter to them.

Ephesians 5: 15-21

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Paul tells them do not live in the ways of the world, do not live a life of selfishness and excess. Do not seek out what the world defines as pleasurable if you are seeking joy and happiness. Instead seek God and you will find a joy and happiness that is immeasurable.

Christian joy is a pure, deep joy, a joy that is brought on by the Holy Spirit when you acknowledge Jesus as your Lord and Saviour and repent and try to live your life in obedience. It is a joy that the secular world will never discover because it is so counter to their self-pleasure-seeking culture. It is a joy that has limitless depth and the apostle Peter describe it as an unspeakable joy, meaning there are no words in the human language that can quite describe what it is to live in relationship with God.

Yes, the secular world can bring along a temporary sense of joy and happiness, or at least what it defines as joy and happiness. However, the things of this world can never really bring a true everlasting sense of joy and happiness because the joy and happiness of this world is always dependent on the circumstances.

Christians instead have an eternal joy and happiness that is dependent on their relationship with God, independent on the circumstances of this world and totally dependent on God. This is the joy and happiness that Christian experience in the study of God's Word, in prayer and in fellowship with one another regardless of what is happening in the world around them, or their own personal life circumstances.

In the book of Acts chapter 16. Paul was on his second mission trip; Silas was going along with him.

As they entered the region of Phillipi, they met a demon possessed slave-girl.

Acts 16:16-18

¹⁶ As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She

followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” ¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

Paul had had enough and commanded the demon to leave the girl and it did. And there was a great round of celebration and worship of the high God. Well not exactly.

Instead

Acts 16:18-24

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

The girls’ owners were angry at their loss of income and had Paul and Silas imprisoned after a beating.

Would this be a place that you would expect to find joy? Paul and Silas had been beaten with rods and now found themselves fastened in the stocks of the prison. This is a place of misery and suffering, of pain and agony, of thirst and starvation.

Yet even here in the prison of Phillipi, after their beating, Paul and Silas find Joy in their hearts.

Acts 16:25-26

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened.

Their circumstances did not dictate their joy. Instead, it was their joy in the Lord that dictated their circumstances. They found joy and happiness in a place where joy and happiness should not exist and in doing so, they changed the lives of many people in Phillipi. The Holy Spirit did its work through them and converted the jailer and caused the magistrates to set them free to continue their journey.

This is why Paul told the church in Rome.

Romans 5:1-2

5 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Rejoice in the hope and glory of God, not in the circumstances of this world.

Romans 5:3-5

³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Rejoice because you have God in your life! Rejoice because regardless of the tribulations and trials, regardless of the pain and suffering, regardless of the hunger and thirst, your life is filled with the Love of God! Rejoice because even when you are in the worst possible circumstance that you can imagine, God is there with you, and the things of this world are only temporary, but his love and salvation are eternal!

Joy is an automatic by-product of faith. This is the life that Christians are called to live in the world. This is the message of the Gospel that we are to proclaim to the world in the way we live, and through our own words if we need to.

This is the joy that the early church knew when they received God's Word in their lives, this is the joy they understood when they gave up their own selfish pursuit of pleasure and repented from sin, when they received God's salvation, his mercy, and his grace.

This is the joy they understood when the Holy Spirit began its works in them, the joy in knowing that God loved his people so much that he sent his son to die upon the cross for them, for all of the sin and disobedience, all of the selfishness and pride, so that they could come back and live in relationship with Him.

How can God's people not be filled with joy, knowing that they had escaped the misery and suffering of the pursuit of joy and happiness in this world and the eternal suffering of living without God's blessings in hell?

How can God's people not be filled with joy, knowing that the Fruits of the Spirit are at work in each of his Children; 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' molding his children into his Salt and Light here on earth?

How can God's people not be filled with joy knowing that they can look forward to a life filled with joy in the presence of God in his kingdom for all of eternity?

How can God's people not live a life filled with joy as they learn more about their God, as they praise and worship him and spend time in fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ?

They cannot. Christians live a life of 'L'chaim' of joy and happiness in knowing that they have their salvation in Jesus Christ, and that is why we celebrate this day of Joy during Advent!

Let us pray,

May We Seek refuge in Your Word

Lord God, heavenly Father,
 you allowed your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
 to become fully human
 and come into the world to destroy the tyranny of the devil.
 Deliver us poor offenders from sin and death
 and give us eternal life.
 Rule and govern our hearts by your Holy Spirit,
 that we may seek no other refuge than his Word and avoid all offense,
 that we may always be found among the faithful followers of your Son,
 and by faith in him obtain eternal salvation,
 through your beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord,
 who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
 one true God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Source: Veit Dietrich

Hymn #160: "Unto Us a Child is Born" (V 1,2,4)

Unto us a child is born!
 Sovereign of creation,
 came once to a world forlorn,
 the Lord of every nation,
 the Lord of every nation.

Cradled in a cattle stall,
 held by love maternal,
 see the Sovereign of us all,
 our Lord of lords eternal,
 our Lord of lords eternal.

'Christ the Source and Christ the End!'
 Let the organ thunder
 while our happy voices rend
 the joyful air asunder,
 the joyful air asunder!

Invitation to Offering

Offering

Presenting our tithes and offerings is an act of worship. I want to encourage you to write a cheque and drop it in the mail to the church using your envelope, if you have one. (St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, PO Box 161, 1 Drummond St W, Perth, ON K7H 3E3). We also have another option for you for giving and that is you can make an e-Transfer. This note from our treasurer:

E-transfers are now accepted. Please note the new email address for this purpose only. standrewspert offering@gmail.com If you have an Offering Envelope #, please include it in the message section of the INTERAC transfer page you fill in. If you wish any part of your donation to go to a specific fund (e.g., Presbyterian Sharing) please mention this in your message.

Offertory Prayer

(Congregant Prepared)

Closing Hymn #152: "Still, Still, Still" (V 1,2,1)

Still, still, still,
he sleeps this night so chill!
The Virgin's tender arms enfolding,
warm and safe the child are holding.
Still, still, still,
he sleeps this night so chill!

Sleep, sleep, sleep,
he lies in slumber deep,
while angel hosts from heaven come winging,
sweetest songs of joy are singing.
Sleep, sleep, sleep,
he lies in slumber deep.

Pastoral Prayer

All Knowing Father,
Praise You for family, friends and our brothers and sisters in Christ.
You have placed people in our lives on purpose, to love us in Your name and for us to love in Your honor.
Christmas is a time to be focused on Your gift to us.
You made us daughters and sons through Jesus' death on the cross.
He came to this earth as a tiny, vulnerable baby boy, and walked the very soil we walk in order to save our souls.

Jesus, Prince of Peace, be present in our family rooms this Christmas.

Be in our kitchens and seated at our tables.

Fill the void of family members we have to let go of this Christmas, and fill our hearts with hope as we wait for our court-appointed hour to celebrate with them again.

Our world is a mess, but there is hope because of Christmas. Matthew 1:23 assures us that God is with us through Jesus Christ.

Thank you for the blessing of family, friends, and our congregation.

Thank you that though we are not perfect, You tell us not to worry, and assure us that no one is (Romans 3:23).

Thank You for giving us people to share Christmas with and call family; for blessing us immensely, with new life and new hope, when we thought we had lost it all and blown all chances of a blessed life.

Your nature is to forgive and restore, and we thank You for Your perfect love in that regard.

Christ was never afraid to befriend those who were not living “perfect” lives.

Help us to walk behind You, Lord, in search of those coming through similar situations that need the wisdom You have granted us.

Show us how to reach out and help others that are struggling through situations that we have survived.

For we know that in giving ourselves in Your honor, we will experience Your peace and presents.

Bless this Christmas, bless our church family and bless this meal we are about to take part in together

In the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, and our Savior, we pray. **Amen.**

Benediction

God the Father, who loved the world
so much that he sent his only Son,
give you grace to prepare for eternal life.

God the Son, who comes to us as Redeemer and Judge,
reveal to you the path from darkness to light.

God the Holy Spirit, by whose working
the virgin Mary conceived the Christ,
help you bear the fruits of holiness. **Amen.**