*following the* CHOIR ANTHEM

**SERMON “#morejoy” – Matthew 1:18-25**

Our topic for today is JOY and what it means to be messengers of JOY. One of the reasons we light a pink candle for this week, is that the 3rd Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday…which I’m sure you all know. The word “*gaudete’* comes from the first word of a Georgian chant, and it means “Rejoice.” And Pastor Lori reminded me that the JOY week traditionally, was a reprieve from the standard Advent liturgy of expectation and preparation, and was a time to remember to the joy, beauty and gladness that is already here. Which is a whole lesson in itself.

<STORY> I often find the Christmas holidays difficult. I don’t live close to my family, my parents, brothers, aunts, uncles and cousins all live back in Northern Ireland. With serving in churches over the past 10 years, and with strained relationships since ‘coming out,’ as well as the passing of grandparents and many members of that older generation, this season can bring up sadness and loneliness. One of the advantages of serving in congregations at this time of year however is that there’s plenty to keep me busy. And For those of us for whom busyness and constant movement are coping mechanisms, well having a day right intentionally set aside to STOP, and on this “Sunday of JOY,” of fretting about what we lack, can’t do, or have yet to do, we are granted the opportunity to think of all the good things life has in fact given you. I give thanks every day for the family I have here, folk who -although they might not have known the start of my journey- continue to encourage and love me at the part of life’s journey I’m in right now. > Joy is important.

So, when I turned to today’s scripture, in Matthew 1:18-25, I was a little perplexed to see that the word JOY doesn’t even show up. In fact, I put my semester of Biblical Greek straight to use to see where and when the Greek word of joy shows up in Matthew. It didn’t take long, I flipped the pages to the very next chapter…only 10 verses in, which says “Then they [the wise astrologers from the East] had saw that the star had stopped they were OVERWHELMED WITH JOY.” Now we’re talking! Another translation is “they rejoiced exceedingly *chairo* with great joy *chara*”. But…let’s back up first…and consider…what invokes this joy-filled outburst from people, who likely weren’t even Jewish, and probably Zoroastrian astrologers from Babylon.

Well, I think that the way the Gospel of Matthew begins is the key. In Matthew chapter 1 we have this long list of names, a genealogy. Now, let’s be clear our Gospel writer is not interested in biology or genetics, but in making a theological claim, which is that 1) Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel’s purpose and hopes; 2) This messianic story is inclusive, extending to women and men of all nations. God’s purpose is to include ALL. The names in this genealogy affirm that God’s plan has often been fulfilled in history in unanticipated and ‘irregular’ ways. 3) Jesus is the royal Messiah, the Son of David, the royal heir to the throne;

This list of names – that we might be tempted to skip over, or struggle to pronounce – speaks to the weight of anticipation that is building up. And you can almost sense the velocity increasing as to read through these first 17 verse of Matthew 1…the sense of importance and significance rising. Which brings us right up to this morning’s passage and in the space of these few short verses we are told of…

* Jesus’ divine origin he is “from the Holy Spirit” (v18, 20 & 21)
* Jesus’ humanity. He is from “Joseph, son of David” (v20)
* His name will symbolize his role, Jesus from the Greek verb *sozo/sous* meaning “to save, to make whole, to be delivered or to heal” (v21 & 25)
* He will fulfil scripture, Isaiah 7:14 (v22-23)

THIS, this person…who will be the very manifestation of God’s presence WITH the people he is coming to save (v23) is the cause of the wise men’s spontaneous and overwhelming outburst of JOY.

And it is this JOY…the JOY that we get to participate in TODAY that I want to spend the remainder of our time together focusing on. Joy, I define as:

1. a good feeling
2. in the soul
3. produced by the Holy Spirit
4. who causes us to see the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ
5. in the Bible – yes; but also in the church, in ourselves, in others and in the world.

**i. Joy – is not an idea, a conviction, a persuasion or a decision – it is an emotion, a feeling.** And by that, I don’t mean something flippant or superficial. I mean that we don’t have immediate control over our feelings or emotions. You can’t snap your finger and decide to feel something. Feelings don’t work like that. Thinking does. But emotions happen to you. Joy is not something we can immediately, by decision, produce.

Now, I do also…for the sake of my supervisory pastor, there can be a distinction made between the emotion of ‘happiness’ and the emotion of ‘joy.’ I have heard some say that where ‘happiness’ is an inch deep and a mile wide; ‘joy’ is a mile deep AND a mile wide. I kinda like that! It may be controversial to say but ‘happiness’ can have a self-centered notion to it, a more individualistic focus. It is there is spades for the celebrations of life…which is great, but it doesn’t stick around for the hard parts. Joy on the other hand, being a mile deep AND a mile wide…is a deeper, more enduring, steadier state of being. It is less a RE-action and more an ACTION. That doesn’t mean that we have control over it or can feel it on demand. But it does mean that the experiences of hardship and suffering don’t send it running for the hills. The theologian Henri Nouwen described the difference between joy and happiness, saying that while happiness is dependent on external conditions, joy is “the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away.” Thus, joy can be present even in the midst of sadness. Joy is an anchor in the storm, a taproot in the desert…which leads me to the second part of my definition:

**ii. Joy – is a good feeling in the soul. Independent of the body, but whose effects can be felt in throughout the body.** Whether it’s tears rolling down your cheeks, heart-racing euphory, or a quiet deep sense of contentment…the feeling of joy can ripple through our bodies. Joy is felt in the very immaterial part of our personhood. And as we go through this Advent series and pray to become better carriers of God’s gifts, messengers of God that bring more hope, more peace, and YES more joy…what an awesome task to set to *not* bring joy to someone who needs it: BUT to unleash joy that is already deep seated inside their souls. You see…moving onto the third part…

**iii. Joy – is produced not by circumstances and is not subject to wealth, recognition, power and honors. Joy is produced by the Holy Spirit.** This is clear because I can’t immediately, by decision, make joy happen. Joy is a Fruit of the Spirit (listed in Galatians 5:22: “Love, JOY, peace…and so on.” Your joy, in your soul, comes from the work of the Holy Spirit IN YOU. Joy can be experiences by more than just the naturally cheerful person, joy is a product of the Holy Spirit’s cultivation…which is why it can withstand the hardships of this life.

**iv. Joy – is produced by the Holy Spirit WHO CAUSES us to see the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ.** Now we’re getting down to the business of Christmas. <<ha>> Joy in scripture is shown to be an attitude that is cultivated in God’s people not because of happy circumstances but because of their hope in God’s promise through Jesus Christ. And here’s what we see in the very first chapter of Matthew, right after that genealogy…a messenger of God comes to Joseph in a dream and causes him to see, to become aware of the mighty significance of his fiancé unborn child. The messenger of God here, has knowledge that Joseph does not have.

For in this moment:

- when Joseph felt shame, God’s messenger brought honor;

- when Joseph felt lost, God’s messenger brought purpose;

- when Joseph felt like he had run out of options,

God’s messenger revealed the he was thinking too small anyway,

- and when Joseph felt heartbroken, alone, and bound by societal obligation;

God’s messenger brought reason for hope, peace and even JOY.

This **is** the power of *Emmanuel*, of God incarnate. The news of Jesus’ birth gives us the

possibility of joy in this broken world,

* in the midst of grief,
* in the midst of health concerns,
* in the midst of climate crises,
* in the midst of discrimination,
* in the midst of debt, anxiety, pain and sleeplessness…

because we are NEVER alone. NEVER.

JOY is…

1. a good feeling
2. in the soul
3. produced by the Holy Spirit
4. who causes us to see the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ AND (finally, also)

**v. in the Bible – yes; but also in the church, in ourselves, in others and in the world.**

The power of *Emmanuel*, GOD-WITH-US, whom we read about in the Bible,

…has gifted us the Holy Spirit,

…who builds up and works in and through the community of the church so that we can experience divine presence and gifts of God - in tangible, casserole-baking, card-sending, phone-calling, praying, hand-holding, embracing ways.

…so that JOY in God is experienced in and through us.

…we are called and equipped by *God who became human*

to be messengers of JOY in this world.

to be presence with others no matter what joy-suckers they have in their lives this season.

to be God’s presence is enough…for when the God IN me, recognizes the God IN you…our souls erupt with JOY! No one knows this more than JOSEPH.

Let us pray,

Holy God-With-Us,

May we feel your presence as we seek to be

People who live out the joyful message of the incarnation,

People who are faithful messengers of bring hope, peace and joy,

to all those who need it.

Thank you for the opportunity to rejoice, and have confidence in you,

the God of Advent, who is with us today, tomorrow and all the days to come.

Amen.

*then* HYMN OF RESPONSE

**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

Holy God, Emmanuel,

you brought joy into this world and in this time of intercession,

we pray now that you will be the joy that dwells in us.

We pray for all those who need the Spirit of Joy to stir inside them today. For those who are in need of joy and confidence that even in the midst of sadness, shame, and sickness, the joy of your presence can still be experienced.

Holy One, you have promised to be present with us in times of trouble and in times of peace; in times of sorrow and times of joy. May your Spirit of Joy intervene now as we speak aloud the names and place of those in need of Joy. <<PAUSE>>

As we continue to pray for all those in need of joy in our church, community and world today, after the phrase *“May the message of God be heard,”* with the words **Do not be afraid.**

* We pray for one another. May end-of-year functions and pre-Christmas busyness not prevent us entering into the spirit of Advent.
  + *“May the message of God be heard,”* **Do not be afraid.**
* We pray for the family and friends of Desmond Crenshaw and for those who experience the sting of loss this Advent season.
  + *“May the message of God be heard,”* **Do not be afraid.**
* We lift up all those listed in our bulletin, for those who are homebound, suffering illness of body or mind, hospitalization or the long journey of recovery.
  + *“May the message of God be heard,”* **Do not be afraid.**
* We pray for our city, for those who have no shelter during these freezing nights, for those in eat of food and warmth, for those suffering in addiction, and poverty, and for to whom we entrust our safety and wellbeing.
  + *“May the message of God be heard,”* **Do not be afraid.**
* We pray each week that our gifts to our 4 Advent charities will bring joy, today we lift up the gifts to *“House of Ruth.”*
  + *“May the message of God be heard,”* **Do not be afraid.**
* We pray for the human family. May these season prompt us all to act fairly and generously in all our social actions, to be messengers of hope, peace, joy and love in a world that so desperately needs it.
  + *“May the message of God be heard,”* **Do not be afraid.**
* We pray for planet Earth, our common home. May the Spirit of creation stir us to take the vital steps needed to protect it for future generations.
  + *“May the message of God be heard,”* **Do not be afraid.**

When we find ourselves overwhelmed by sorrow and sadness, let us remember that those feelings cannot rob us of the deep sense of joy that you have gifted to your people. Let us remember our role as messengers of joy to others in our church, our community and in the world. Let us respond with a carol of joy. Amen. **Amen.**

*followed by* CHORAL RESPONSE

*then the* CLOSING HYMN

During the final verse of the *Closing Hymn*

Hand the PINK Joy Candle to the candle-bearer

Turn and walk to the center of the sanctuary.

**BENEDICTION**

Let us turn now toward the Candle of JOY

in the center of our sanctuary

and remember that the God of joy and possibility

has called us to be to be present in *and* with

a world that is so in need of joy.

As we go then from this place,

remember WE ARE THE MESSENGERS.

called to be *angels among us* bring the message

“God is with you. Do not be afraid.”