

December 8, 2024,
Second Sunday of Advent, at St. Michael's Church
The Reverend Joshua Wong

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, thank you for being the source of our joy. Even when life may be difficult, remind us of your faithfulness, so that we may share your joy with others. Amen.

Happy Second Sunday of Advent everyone. I hope that you have enjoyed your eight pieces of chocolate so far from your Advent calendar.

In St. Francis of Assisi's book, *LOVE POEMS FROM GOD - Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, a story that may be unfamiliar to some people is that sometimes when Francis was traveling with his brother monks he would pick up a stick and pretend it was a violin bow and his arm a violin, and he would start playing the violin and singing French songs that his mother had taught him as a child. Francis would leap about and dance and become ecstatic. It is said of Francis that his love for God at times made him so wild that few understood him. No doubt about it, St. Francis' exceptional life was a great blessing to many, so much that our church celebrates the Feast of St. Francis on October 4. As you may know, He is the patron saint of animals and the environment. He was a gifted mediator, and overall a creative and passionate person. Many theologians contribute

St. Francis' passion with his close communion with God.

St. Francis' zeal reminds us of another person from today's Gospel. John, the son of Zechariah was a person full of passion with a strong conviction. Our Gospel portrays John excitedly and passionately proclaiming the baptism of repentance in the wilderness.

Although St. Francis may not be the first person we think of during our season of Advent, his story and our Gospel's story demonstrate the joy of two individuals. Their joy, passion and commitment come from interconnectedness in Christ. They show us that when we walk with the Lord daily, joy abounds in our lives. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit and is represented in one of the four Advent candles. In this Season of Advent, we anticipate and await Jesus, who brings us hope, joy, peace and love. All these emotions offer our lives inner tranquility, and emotional well-being.

So, what is the joy of the Lord?

The concept of joy is conveyed throughout today's reading, and I counted the word "joy," mentioned three times. It is apparent that joy is an integral

part of our Christian life. Our passages show that joy comes from knowing that we are set free from the bondage of sin, and from receiving God's gift of grace.

Joy is not just an emotion, and is different from happiness. Joy is connected to our soul. Some of you may know about Father Richard Rohr, who is a Franciscan friar and ecumenical teacher. He speaks about how joy is part of our soul. Father Richard is the Founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, and teaches how God's grace guides us to our birthright as beings made of Divine Love. He says that, "joy proceeds from the inner realization of our union with God, which descends upon us at ever-deeper levels as we walk our faith journey." He continues to say, "The soul itself is an image of God, to which God is so present that the soul can actually grasp God, and is capable of possessing God and of being a partaker in God." Ironically, it is only in letting go that we most truly "possess" God and participate in God's fullness. This "possessing God" is another way of saying, abiding in God.

St. Francis and John's joyfulness comes from their inner core, it comes from a close bond with God. I would imagine that it would be like singing a

hymn that so touched you, that you are transcended into a moment with God. It's as if it touched your soul. It could be a sentence in your book, or a smell that lifted your soul. It is as if your soul is grasped and united to God.

The candle that we lit represents joy. It is here that we reflect on where joy is in our lives during Advent? Is joy considered important to you? In this season of Advent, from 1-10, where is your level of joy?

We are reminded today of the gift of joy. Yet this emotion requires effort on our part to make it stronger. At times, joy is a choice we make and need to practice. Sometimes, we need to choose joy. We cannot expect others to give us joy.

I like what Gerri wrote about joy in the latest issue of *The Guardian*. She wrote, "Joy is not comparing what other's have that you don't have, instead, think about the things other people have that you are grateful you don't have! I chuckled out loud. Certainly, it helps to put joy in a new perspective. The world can offer joy, but the joy from the Lord is different. God's joy is constant and enduring. God's joy is constant because God is faithful.

Learning to be joyful is important for other reasons. Learning to live in harmony with God helps us during life's difficult transitions. When unexpected events happen, our relationship with God provides us with the strength we need to go forward. This is the case with the people of Judah.

The joy of the Lord is a phrase found in the Book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah said this to the exhausted people of Judah when they rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem after its destruction. God did not want His people to remain dejected. He had not rejected them but was in the process of restoring them. "Nehemiah said, "This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Joy is a tremendous source of strength. Proverbs 17 says, "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." This can be true for us today. "Emotional energy" is extremely powerful in how we face life.

The National Institutes of Health finds that patients with higher baseline levels of emotional well being have a higher recovery and survival rates than patients who don't. This is why providing joy to those who are sick, hungry, poor and lonely are important ministries.

God's joy is meant to be received and shared with others. We share joy everyday by offering a smile to a stranger, or by offering a contribution to a cause. We show joy by forgiving others and by bridging understanding for each other.

The other night, my sister, whom some of you met at church, went out to dinner with my older brother and his wife and their autistic son Derek. At the next table over, my sister in law saw a healthcare worker tending to a full table of special needs people. Those young adults must have reminded her of Derek. She went over and gave the healthcare worker a red envelope with money in it. Red envelopes are what many Asian cultures use as a vehicle for a gift, in lieu of a gift box. The red envelope was a Christmas gift for her. This is an example of altruism springing from a heart of generosity and joy. Somehow, when we have joy, we can't help but be generous towards others.

A joy-filled life happens when we are aligned with Christ. Alignment happens when we spend time together as a community, and when we spend time in daily devotion. It happens when we prepare ourselves during Advent.

Last week I spoke about the invention of the Advent Calendar. Last week's window revealed the gift of hope.

Today's window reveals the gift of joy. In it, I give you the gift of John 3:1, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" My dear friends, we are gifted with the identity of God's children, and therefore we are gifted with joy.

To some of us, this season is not filled with joy. Some may have lost a love one, or lost a job, or a broken relationship. But it's precisely at this time in Advent that the God of grace will soon arrive to give us hope and joy.

And so, as our beautiful Baruch passage says, "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.

For God will give you evermore the name, "Righteous Peace, and Godly Glory." May God give us grace as we wait for the coming of our savior.

Amen.