

Called to Joy  
Psalm 126 (and Philippians 1:3-11)  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
September 5, 2021  
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

We heard reference to two scriptures today. One, from Philippians, which Jay talked about in the Children's Moment begins, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you..." (*Philippians 1:3-4*). Sometimes this is how our joy comes...easily, like water falling over a waterfall.

And sometimes - maybe more often than we would like these days, joy is more the way our psalm names it...something we remember or we hope for rather than what we feel in the moment.

"When Primo Levi wrote about being an Auschwitz survivor, his thoughts went directly to the man who smuggled soup and bread to him every day. [He said,] 'I am alive today, not so much because of [Lorenzo's] material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his plain and gentle manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole'" ("From the editor/publisher" by Peter W. Marty, *Christian Century*, August 25, 2021).

Sometimes we have to remember that which we are *not* currently experiencing. Sometimes it is a memory that gives us hope and that gets us through.

The psalmist seemed to know this.

Here in today's psalm, one that is associated with pilgrimage holy days when people were traveling to Jerusalem, the people recalled events of joy in their history. They remembered that once they had lived in exile, but that exile did not have the final word. They remembered that they were able to return to their homeland, that God was, in fact, still present. They remembered that even though they had felt the absence of God, they reconnected and discovered joy again.

See, remembering wasn't just about remembering...it wasn't just about looking back. Rather, they remembered in order to anticipate what would happen again and again. They remembered in order that, when they were again wondering or suffering, they would have something nearby to call upon, that would help get them through. Psalm 126 is about, as J.L. Mays said, "joy remembered, and joy anticipated" (Howard Wallace, [Year C Lent 5 Psalm 126 \(unitingchurch.org.au\)](http://unitingchurch.org.au)).

And, friends, many of us could use a little more joy.

After all, life is difficult.

Just as we thought we were seeing the light at the end of the COVID tunnel, in came the delta variant. And suddenly we were asked to bring our masks back out. We were

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asked to be cautious about gathering again. We started to see the possibility of a future where we might have to find our way through another winter of hunkering down in our homes, and for many that means without much physical community around them. We also have found, within ourselves and our neighbors, how difficult it is to reign ourselves back in even for the good of our community. This is discouraging. And we could use a little more joy.

Twenty years after the United States began military action in Afghanistan, it looked like the end was in sight and most people, on both sides of our deeply divided nation, thought that was the right move and had confidence that we could leave a positive legacy behind. And yet over the last couple of weeks, our news feeds have been filled with pictures of people clinging to moving airplanes, headlines of military and civilian deaths, little that feels hopeful. And suddenly we are back to blaming and debating and wondering and fearing. And we could use a little more joy.

For a moment last summer we thought that the earth was going to heal as we were staying home more. But now, wildfires abound, especially in the western parts of our country, leaving destruction where forests and farmlands, businesses and homes, had been. Meanwhile, Hurricane Ida made landfall in the South on Sunday and spent days tearing apart lives, leaving flooding and power outages in her path. And still, people of Haiti are awaiting aid after the August 14 earthquake. If the past tells us anything, most will be impacted for years to come. The earth is crying out and while we seem sad when we hear the news and see the pictures, too seldom do we change our habits. We get overwhelmed. We turn away. We, and the earth, could use a little more joy.

And I haven't even mentioned the personal pain that folks have been going through. Loss of loved ones in an especially difficult time. Uncertainty around jobs and financial security. Higher rates of depression and suicide and domestic violence. This time has been hard. And we could use a little more joy.

Into our lives and our struggles comes this psalm and it challenges us to remember God's faithfulness...to remember the times when we were certain about love and joy and hope...to remember other times when we made it through something that in the moment felt impossible.

But also remember, this is not a psalm encouraging toxic positivity. It doesn't tell us not to acknowledge the pain and pretend everything is okay. Rather the psalm itself says, "May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy." The psalmist knows that life vacillates between sorrow and joy, between hopelessness and hope. The psalmist names that not everything is great all the time. *And* the psalmist holds out hope that joy will come again.

So, maybe now is the time for us to remember again what joy is. Joy is not the same as happiness. Joy is not always accompanied by a gleaming smile. Joy is not a feeling. Joy is not dependent upon our circumstances. In fact, in the opening chapter

of Philippians we are told that Paul proclaimed his joy even from a place of imprisonment. The circumstances couldn't stop the joy.

So what is joy? Joy is an attitude, a position from which we live, a place we are rooted. Joy is connected to hope and contentment. Joy is something we can choose or at least recall the possibility of even on our most difficult days.

And here's something else to remember. Joy is something that we can let others help us find. Remember, this psalm was a communal song that was sung as the people went together toward Jerusalem. It was a song of the community's hope and belief that ultimately joy was possible. And sometimes, when we are in the midst of our most difficult days, we need someone else to sing a song of hope on our behalf...sometimes we simply need the community around us to know that joy will return until finally we can know it as well. And sometimes it is we who offer that gift to others.

Friends, joy is a position from which we are invited to live. It is not about giddiness or smiling all the time. It doesn't mean nothing bad will ever happen to us. But joy gives us hope. It helps us live from contentment. Joy isn't just a feeling but it drives us to live in certain ways.

When we remember and anticipate joy, when we live from a position of joy, then we live differently. We live with a sense that what we do impacts others...we live with an awareness of how we can better the world, not just for ourselves, but for others...we live with the real experiences, even difficult experiences, of today but with the belief that tomorrow can have a different story, a fuller story, a story of hope and possibility.

So, how do we nurture joy within ourselves and our communities?

Perhaps the place to start is simply to look for it.

Have you ever had a time in your life when things were falling apart and someone came alongside you to support you? Remember that joy.

Have you lived through a crisis...perhaps a flood, a derecho, a global pandemic...and witnessed people who had no previous connection reach out to one another, strangers help each other? Remember that joy.

Have you ever had an experience...perhaps of illness or grief...whose intensity felt like it would swallow you whole, but then...eventually...you learned that even with this new companion you could laugh at something funny, you could taste a delicious treat, you could feel the warmth of a friend's hug? Remember that joy.

And what would happen if we added to our list of joyful moments? What if we lived with the intention to discover a little piece of joy each day? What if we slowed down enough to pay attention to the people and places and experiences in this world that help us let

down our shoulders and simply be content? And what if we filed those away so we can remember that joy?

And what if we did this in intentional connection with God? Remember, ours is a God who wills good for us. Ours is a God who created us and all of the world in goodness. Ours is a God who calls us to be shaped by love and for joy.

Friends, life can be difficult...and it seems we are living the intensity of that. And meanwhile, joy weaves her way amidst the challenges and griefs and invites us to welcome her in. And on the days when it is difficult, let us remember times when joy came easy...let us hope for joy to come again...and let us be ready to celebrate when joy is our reality. May it be so.