

Isaiah 42:1-9

Make Room for Joy-Advent 3

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*Title Slide: Make Room for Joy

Last Sunday, John took our dog, JR, for a walk. They had been gone awhile when my phone rang and it was John. He was calling to tell me that, as they finished their walk and came up over the hill, there were two deer in our neighbor's yard. JR, off his leash at the time, gave chase and did not return immediately when John called. As we were talking on the phone, JR came bounding back and a minute later, the two of them were home.

*JR burst into the house with what I can only describe as pure joy. Everything about him, his bright eyes, his wagging tail, and that Labrador smile, all screamed joy. He was created to do that thing.

JOY. This third week of Advent, we turn our attention to joy. We tend to use the words happiness and joy interchangeably. From a theological perspective they are different. Happiness is situational. We feel happy when everything is going the way we want it to. I'm happy when everything on my "to-do" list gets finished or when the thermostat is set on the temperature I prefer. I'm happy when I don't have to cook dinner or when our family visits. Unlike happiness, though, joy is not dependent on what's going on around us. We can cultivate a spirit of joy, even in the midst of circumstances in which we do not feel happiness. In his book, *Here and Now*, theologian and priest, Henri Nouwen wrote, "Joy is not the same as happiness. We can be unhappy about many things, but joy can still be there because it comes from the knowledge of God's love for us." I know someone who has been an example of this in my life.

During my last semester of seminary, I was working full time as an associate minister, taking 4 classes in seminary, including a unit of clinical pastoral education which required me to serve as a chaplain at the hospital 2 days and one overnight each week. Life was busy...and not much fun. About that time, Bob, a member of the church I was serving was diagnosed with cancer and began chemotherapy. I tried to go every couple of weeks and hang out with him at the Cancer Center while he was having an infusion. He is a very well-read person and knows a lot about a lot of things, including theology. Every time I went to see him, he was joking with the nurses, had a funny story to tell me, and never failed to ask what I was studying in seminary and what my latest paper was about. When I told him, it was the beginning of a deep theological discussion, during which his wife would often excuse herself (and who can blame her). Bob loved debating this doctrine or that. His joy, in the midst of nausea, fatigue, and pain helped me access my own joy, even what was happening in my life wasn't much fun.

I've noticed that people like Bob have something in common. They are able to see beyond their own circumstances and continue to be a source of compassion and love for other people. While they endure hardship after hardship in their own lives, they take meals to their neighbors, babysit a friend's child, care for aging parents, volunteer at CONCERN, work on their co-worker's car, and even help seminarians think theologically. I don't think its an accident that people who are externally focused also seem to be the ones whose joyful spirit is hard to miss.

Today's text from Isaiah is not about joy, but it will help us consider how we can cultivate joy in our lives. It was written in a time when the Israelites were in the midst of significant hardship, having been deported from the promised land---scattered, strangers in a strange land. The prophet's words were meant to help the displaced Israelites see a way forward.

*Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

² He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;

³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵ Thus says God, the Lord,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

⁶ I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,^[a]
a light to the nations,

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸ I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

This is the first of the four Servant Songs, in the writings of Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah is the name scholars have given to the anonymous prophet whose words are found in Isaiah 34-35 and 40-55. These prophecies date from 540 BCE, about 45 years after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire, about a generation after Ezekiel, whom we talked about last week. The situation for the Israelites was even worse now. How does a prophet go about talking to people who have been completely traumatized by seeing their city and temple destroyed, their family and friends killed or taken away in shackles to a foreign land, and who believe God has abandoned them? The people needed a pep talk of “biblical proportions.”

The subject of today’s text, the servant, offers a profound example of strength in the midst of vulnerability. It is power that does not scream or shout (v 2), and is very different from the brutal force executed by the empires of the day. The servant, even while oppressed, does not stop working for justice and urging others to do the same.

Let’s talk for a minute about the servant. The million-dollar question for scholars is, “Who is the servant?” They debate whether the servant represents a single person or a group of people, maybe Israel. Some claim the poetic nature of the text requires the servant be interpreted symbolically, representing different people in different times. Others say the servant’s identity is intentionally unclear so readers are drawn to the nature of the servant’s work rather than the identity of the servant. Christianity, and many of its scholars, including John Calvin, have historically identified the servant with Jesus, although our Jewish brothers and sisters would never interpret the text that way. Calvin, in his commentary on Isaiah, points out the ways the servant reflects the character of Jesus Christ, pursuing justice and compassion, in spite of the cost to himself.

There won't ever be agreement on the servant's identity, but there is agreement on the nature of the servant's work. It is the work of a person or persons who have suffered, yet choose to ease the suffering of others; who enter into situations that would be much easier to ignore; who are called to be part of the "something new" God is doing. I don't think there is any question that Jesus was one of those people. In this Advent season, we remember the ways in which Jesus worked to bring about God's vision of something new in the world. One of the ways he did that was by reminding his followers of God's unrelenting love for all of us. It is a love that nothing--sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war or even death can take away. When we are sure of that, we know joy. I would bet that, as we engage in the work of loving and caring for the world, being "light to the nations," joy will come. And we will become the people we were created to be. Amen.