

We have lit the pink Advent Candle of JOY for this *third* Sunday of Advent. It follows the candles of Hope and Peace. Some ask: why not wait til the fourth Sunday, to give us a chance to develop more Joy?! We follow the tradition of early Christians who insisted that Joy is good to celebrate, even when we are not there yet ... even when the world is far from Joy... But our faith, our conviction, is that there are always glimpses, sparks, one little flicker of light perhaps... of hope, peace, love and joy... so we CAN celebrate even a little spark, even a seed of these ideals.

The Bible readings speak of visions and ideals. The **prophet Isaiah**, in his future vision is all about reversals and healing, “The desert shall be glad, the lame will leap, the tongue of the speechless will sing...” (Is 35:1-6). And we are clear that it is a *future* vision! It is something we work towards, and sometimes wait for with patience. In the beginning of **Luke**, Mary sings or rejoices about the awareness of a holy seed in her womb... her song is often called the Magnificat (My soul *magnifies* the Lord). She has an inner experience of great things happening. She hears an angelic voice, and is so convinced that great things are *already* happening (God *has* filled the hungry, *has* pulled down the powerful). We remember when she greeted her older cousin, that babe in Elizabeth’s womb started dancing all around (Lk 1:47), all immediate present tense experiences. And the letter from **James** highlights the virtues, the ideals, of patience and steadfastness, waiting for rain, waiting for seeds to germinate... while at the same time James is always about ideal behavior(!)... urging us not to complain about each other! Other translations say “Stop grumbling against one another, but follow the example of the prophets in their suffering and patience.”(James 5:7-10). In other words, if we want more hope, peace, love and joy, in the

world, we have to be honest and accepting of our own natural suffering, rather than project onto others and blame others and criticize others when we are unhappy or suffering. In other words, Life has suffering, even on holidays... we get frustrated and angry, but don't take it out on others.

So back to little seeds of JOY. I want to name a couple. I am glad that we have bright, caring people at Belleville! I may have pastoral overseeing, but I know too well that I don't have the energy and can't lead everything. I was so glad that Gail, in our Worship group, took on the job of researching various Advent Wreath writings. She suggested Advent Candlelight readings this year from our Methodist friends. I love the words in our third candle lighting this morning! "*We cling to the truth that God has saved, God is saving, and God will save!*" That is so well said, a concise theological statement of faith that speaks volumes! In other words, let's notice what God *has* done, how we *are* experiencing God's presence right now, and thus have steadfast hope that God *will* continue saving, healing, and redeeming, in our future!

Another seed of Joy: I want to tell you about a "concert" at the Jewish Synagogue last Monday night! True confessions: I went sort of out of obligation, since someone invited me and paid my way as his guest. I wasn't really in the mood to go out on a cold night and was feeling low energy (I didn't know it, but I had indeed caught a bug, probably on Sunday(!) that laid me low the rest of the week). The Rabbi greets me at the door and asks if I'm ready for the evening to "blow my mind!" I kind of chuckled..... But sure enough! I was amazed at the extent of joyful singing that night! It reminded me of a Bar Mitzvah that I went to for my great nephew! It also reminded me of Kirtan, the Eastern chanting that

so many yoga studios offer. It reminded me also of whirling dervish music of mystical Muslims, and of the never ending praise songs of Christian Pentecostals. The young woman leader was charismatic... full of a spirit of joy, her face radiant with gladness and thanksgiving. The repetitiveness and energy of the music, if you allow it to wash over you, could usher anyone into a rather ecstatic state. It was not just a concert, but as the leader said, an evening of praise and prayer, connecting everyone in a beautiful spirit, that ushered in feelings of Shalom, of Peace, Love, and Joy.

I'm not saying we should become Jewish charismatics, or Christian Pentecostals, singing songs and chants that never seem to end, but the experience does speak to me about *intentionality*, about helping create some of the reality that we want. With *focus* on hope and joy... we help it become a reality. So I use the word "steadfast" in my sermon title ("Steadfast Rejoicing"), to say that Rejoicing, Giving Thanks and Praise, can be transformative... especially when we are steadfast about it, when we make it a practice, a habit, giving thanks and praise, for even the smallest seeds of God's love or goodness.

The young woman singer at the synagogue was also honest about the reality of suffering in life, and in her own life. Thus God's "salvation" may be known as "*transformation*." A change, sometimes gradual, sometimes sudden, from the negative to the positive, from darkness to light. She emphasized a Hebrew word for "Redemption," asked the audience if we had any stories of redemption to share, and then shared some of her own life story that involved redemption. In short, it had to do with some of the expectations of orthodoxy... that caused her to marry at a very young age, suffer incompatibility and divorce, but then find new

light and love on the other side... with new relationships, and with her God in times of prayer and praise. She was an example the words salvation, healing, and transformation!

Let's trust the words for our third Advent candle reading... and "cling to the truth that *God has saved, God is saving, and God will save*. In our trust let's look for sparks of light and seeds of love, then give thanks and praise to a God who is everywhere.

In our gospel Advent reading today, Mary, mother of Jesus, was trusting in God's saving/redeeming presence at a very young age, singing that her soul "rejoices in God her Savior." Mary surely knew suffering; I'll bet Jesus was tough to raise at times; we know he left his parents for a few days at age 12, and was found in the temple philosophizing with the Rabbis. He must have taken leave of the family many times, and at age 30 even went into a desert to fast and pray for 40 days and nights. Mary suffered by watching her son suffer in his life and in his death. But Mary was an example of one who spent much time in prayer with God, so she sing with steadfast faith and joy: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Let's be "steadfast" in rejoicing, noticing even the small seeds of hope, peace, love and JOY. This holiday season, there is plenty of suffering in the world, but we can look for every little seed of love and laughter. This next song that I will do with my sister-in-law (Where are you Christmas, by Faith Hill) starts with feelings of loss and despair, but ends with hope and trust, that transformations and reversals *have happened, are happening, and will continue to happen* if we have eyes to see! *God has saved, is saving and will continue to save. Jesus has come, Christ Spirit is here* among us, and *will continue to come as Holy Spirit*. Amen.