

Resounding Joy
Advent 3B
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Today we hear the joy of dreams come true resounding from the Scripture. We hear the sound of singing, rejoicing, laughter. Today is Gaudete Sunday. The Sunday of Joy. The countdown has begun and we are looking toward the first coming of the Lord in a little town on the far side of nowhere, in a manger. We look and long and stretch toward the mystery of Word made Flesh in Jesus Christ.

Last week I mentioned the desperate prayers we've heard during Advent. "How long Oh Lord?" "Restore us again O Lord!" "Show us your steadfast love O Lord. Grant us you salvation!" "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!" Today, we hear the sound of laughter and rejoicing:

*1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."
3 The Lord has done great things for us;
we are glad.
4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like streams in the Negeb!
5 Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy! (Ps 126:1-5)*

The Lord has heard the cries of His people. He has not forsaken them in their despair. As we turn to the Gospel reading, joy rings out differently. Plays a different song so to speak. Jesus and his disciples are baptizing new followers. John's disciples see that more people are now following Jesus than John. After his life of service, his ministry is diminishing. They are concerned, but John is rejoicing. For this is exactly supposed to be what happens. He compares his calling to the friend of the bridegroom. The friend helps serve and facilitate to bring the groom to the bride, but once the bridegroom has his bride, the friend recedes from the picture. His great joy in serving his friend is now complete.

While there is no denying John gives us a picture of joy fulfilled the service of the friend, his joy doesn't seem to compare with the joy we read about in Psalm 126: mouths filled with laughter, tongues shouting joy. John says that his joy is now complete. I want to pause just briefly over John's joy made complete and why this is cause for laughter and shouts of joy.

First, I want to tell you about a dream I had this week while meditating on this text. I dream easily and often. If I am kneeling too long one Sunday, I may have drifted off into a sweet dream. Trust me: that has happened before. I practically close my eyes and start dreaming. Most dreams are fun and silly. But some dreams give me pause. Almost like I've brushed up against a mystery that is bigger than I can grasp.

We sometimes experience these moments of brushing up against a mystery that is greater than us when we are overwhelmed with a song, a piece of art, the view on a mountain trail, or other unexpected moments when we feel like something has happened. God has drawn near. We may not even be able to articulate why we are so moved, but something deep within us has stirred. More about this mystery in a moment.

Earlier this week, I go to sleep thinking about John and his great joy. I wake up dreaming about flying through a giant department store with high ceilings. A little boy asks me to take him flying. He holds onto my neck as we fly through the building. Suddenly the radio comes on and I hear what sounds like U2. Only my brother is singing the vocals. He is singing “Mercy triumphs over justice. Mercy triumphs over justice.” Then I wake thinking about the dream and John the Baptist. I told my brother the dream. He said that’s interesting and proceeded to tell me about an employee who was stressed out, performing poorly at work, and getting worse. Normally, this would be the time to let the employee go.

My brother decided to give the man raise instead. Suddenly he was a new person. His performance completely turned around and his attitude improved. Mercy triumphs over justice.

Now, this is from a verse in James, but the actual verse reads, “mercy triumphs over judgment.” He is exhorting the people to treat one another with mercy, in kindness and humility. It is about us showing mercy to each other. But actually, our ability to show mercy is ultimately rooted in the mercy and grace of God. Our mercy is rooted in His mercy.

In fact, there is no mercy outside of his mercy. That world would be terrifying. The film *Dogville* reveals a town stripped of mercy. It is horrific. We may see evil in our world now but were it not for the grace of God, our world would be unthinkable.

In his little book, “On the Incarnation,” Athanasius writes about our world in desperate need of God’s mercy. He talks about how sin sets in motion the undoing, the unraveling of all things. We become less and less human and eventually become nothing. Were it not for the grace of God, the world would have descended into death and destruction. It makes me think of “The Never-Ending Story.” In this story, the nothingness threatens everyone and everything. The world is descending into nothingness.

Sometimes when we see the horrors in our world, we catch a glimpse of this world gone wrong. This darkness that would envelop everyone and everything were it not for God’s grace. In these prayers of desperation we heard throughout Advent, we encountered a people pressed up against the impact of sin and death. We encounter a people desperate for God’s intervention.

When we encounter John the Baptist in the Gospels, we see this desperate cry of God’s people across the ages embodied in one man. John the Baptist is the cry of repentance for God’s coming and the hopeful expectation of His kingdom come. Thus John becomes the greatest of all the prophets for he not only bears the anguish of the intercessor for God’s people, he enjoys the privilege of beholding the Lord of Glory coming from afar, coming to usher in the kingdom of God.

John the Baptist stands at the threshold of the coming God and God’s kingdom. He utters the cry of desperation and beholds the answer to the prayers of God’s people from across the ages. In

Jesus, John has beheld, has pressed up against a mystery that is greater than he can grasp and yet resounds within the depth of all that he is.

So yes, John's joy truly is made complete. When Jesus comes preaching, teaching, baptizing, revealing, Psalm 126 is being fulfilled. The long-awaited joy has come into the world, rescuing it from sin and darkness. Athanasius teaches us that just as all creation has been made in and through Jesus Christ, the Word of God, so all creation must be redeemed and restored in and through Jesus Christ.

John presses up against more than he even knows. Though he is the greatest of the prophets, he will not be able to grasp the full implications of this world made new in Jesus Christ. This coming is good news, so good that most people will doubt it, add to it. This is nothing short of the new heavens and new earth beginning in the person of Jesus Christ.

Today and during this season we press up against this mystery. Like a midnight dream, a penetrating song, a breathtaking view, we have stepped into the glory of a reality that is simply greater than we can grasp. We have pressed up against the mystery of the ages, the Beautiful One, the hope of all creation. Let every heart prepare him room.

The heavens and the earth join in song, in joyful acclaim at the coming of the King. This joy bursts out in song, in fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains. The whole world resounds the joy of the world. Even if in the midst of the darkness, we know that the darkness cannot, will not overcome the light of his love. So we watch and wait in joy, joy, joy, unspeakable full of grace and glory. In Christ alone, mercy triumphs over judgment.

As Paul reminds in 2 Corinthians, we bear this Good News, this hope, this joy, this love, this reconciling Gospel to the world.

18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.