

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, we ready ourselves for the coming of the Savior. We seek to prepare our hearts to receive him once again by doing our best to live out this Gospel in a world in need. We seek you out in times of certainty and abundance, and also in times of doubt and famine. We sometimes give into fear; we sometimes let ourselves depend on the work of our hands far more than we would care to admit. But you are there to guide us back to you. In that trust, we lift up all those things on our hearts and those spoken here today; guide us to walk the steps of Jesus in how we nurture each other and ourselves in Christ's example.

We seek you, O King of Joy, but the world is much more complex. This is a world where we are taught to rely upon ourselves, to despair when all does not go our way, to hide ourselves when the times are challenging. You came to bring us joy and to allow that joy to spurn us to bring joy to the entire world. Creation resounds with that calling, but because we are complicated human beings, we struggle. We do not praise you by taking care of your creation; we abuse it. We do not worship you by living the example of Jesus in caring for our neighbors near and far; we blame them for issues they cannot control. Guide us to live into the difficulties of a life that proclaims joy while also recognizing that joy for the world is not yet complete. You ask many things of us, God, but we know that we will never be alone to do your work in this world. We pray all these things in the name of Joy incarnate, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together...

SERMON

Something left unresolved...can really bother you. I don't know if you're big into a lot of TV series, but at the end of a season is usually a cliffhanger. Unless you're getting into it late and can immediately jump to the next season, you're left...unresolved. There's

always that cliffhanger where one of the main characters gets in this binding situation where there's no way out...then he/she gets out at the beginning of the next season, which comes around, oh...9 months later. In that kind of waiting is tension. Tension is that time when you are in-between, without resolution, and forced to just hold onto the lack of resolution. Tension can leave you guessing...what I'm gonna say next. Tension can leave you guessing...what I'm gonna do next. Tension is difficult to handle because it's unnerving. It leaves one unsatisfied, for nothing is at rest. At the same time...we need to live into it, as difficult as that proposition may be. It's the message of Advent...and life.

Now we come to the third week of Advent. Advent is a time of profound tension. We know the Savior is coming...but he hasn't come yet. We have recognized peace and preparation, and now we ready our hearts for joy. With our theme of hymns, what better hymn to recognize than "Joy to the World?" I'm sure you might be expecting a sermon of warm fuzzies with this hymn of joy, but we need to look at joy responsibly as not only an end in itself but how it leads us to follow a course of faithfulness. Joy, as you know, often gets equated to happiness in our world, and culture wants to feed on it as an escape. But real joy has more energy and more consequence. We hold it as we also hold onto a world in need. Do we recognize how, when we sing this hymn, we are also demonstrating a great deal of tension? It is a meaningful vision. Let's look again at the idea of joy in the hymn of "Joy to the World," name the tension, and apply these ideas to our lives and Advent.

Let's turn to page 246 so we can see the words themselves from the hymnal. "Joy to the World! The Lord is come! Let Earth receive her King! Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing! And heaven and heaven, and nature sing!" I'm inspired by the very first line. It is a song of praise, of joyfulness, of a heart full of wonder. It is a

vision of a world fully complete. A few weeks ago, we discussed joy, and now we find ourselves back on that subject. This week, Advent calls us to rediscover joy in all of its forms as joy comes into the world in the form of Christ. Joy is not happiness. Happiness depends on external circumstances. Joy can be fed and renewed from the outside, but the true source of joy is internal. Joy comes from bringing ourselves close to God in not only word, belief, and devotion, but in action. We feed our joy through serving God and others. We feed our joy by doing what we were created to do: be in relationship with one another, taking care of each other, loving each other. We find joy when we are with our loved ones and when we serve those we may not love as much. We sing “Joy to the World” because God is with us on earth, but we also sing it because God is coming and has come to show us what joy truly is. We learn how to be people of God by living through the example of Christ.

There’s one theme that resounds throughout this hymn that we can easily miss. It’s not really about people. As you read through the hymn, there’s very few mentions about how Jesus affects us as people by themselves. Instead, it takes a much wider view. This is a hymn that resounds with God’s redemption of creation. It’s not “Let the faithful receive their King;” it’s “Let Earth receive her King.” It’s not “Joy to the People;” it’s “Joy to the World!” It resounds with a wide-scope view of redemption and bringing all into the fold. The second verse is much more explicit: “while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, repeat the sounding joy.” All of creation rejoices that the Lord comes, for the Lord brings completion. When we discuss Christ, we often only look at how Jesus affects us, but there is a lot of theological sense to recognizing how Christ redeems creation just by his presence. God, yes, GOD is on Earth...everything is different. Indeed, in Eastern Christianity, there is another mode of thinking about the Incarnation, Christ coming to Earth. In Western

strands of Christianity, we tend to reflect on the incarnation as Christ coming down to creation. In the Eastern Church, the thought instead is that Christ sanctifies creation through his presence. In essence, Christ brings creation up to him, blessing creation for Christ's purposes, and we all celebrate together as the sacred Creation.

That is wonderful; that is true. Now, think about what is outside these doors. Does the joy we sing about exist in full? Is the sanctification of creation complete? Nope. We talk about joy, we discuss the joyfulness of this hymn, but when we look outside, there is trouble everywhere. We in these walls talk about creation as a fellow worshipper of our Creator. "Light Through Darkness" by John Chryssavgis, a primer on Eastern Christianity, explains how Creation goes by the wayside when push comes to shove. We sin, he says, when we do not treat the world as a sacrament. We are connected to this world in so many ways, and for us to treat it like a thing is a sin against God. To pollute the air we breathe and the water we drink is to not only hurt creation but to hurt ourselves at the same time, he explains. From that tradition, he also calls everyone to treat nature with "the same delicacy, the same sensitivity, and exactly the same tenderness with which we respond to any human person in a relationship," recognizing that "all of our spiritual activities are judged by their impact on our world, especially upon the environment." We live in a society, indeed a world, where it is easily overlooked that we abuse Creation. The difficulty doesn't stop there. On the same token, we lose who we are and injure each other in word or deed. We speak badly about one another, but much more seriously, we can often overlook the neediest of people. Our systems neglect God's people. Is this fully "Joy to the World?" I have to say no; that joy is not all the way there. We have joy, but we also have much more pain and struggle in this world than we care to realize. We live in tension.

So what do we do? We have to accept the difficult tension. We have to hold in one hand the wonderment and joyousness of Christmas. We hold in our lives that there is joy, and that joy comes from within. On the other hand, we have to truly accept the difficulty of life. There is war. People abuse one another, and then they react from that abuse to abuse more. As I was writing this sermon, news broke of the school shooting in Centennial, CO. The world treats creation, which we recognize worships Christ, as something to be used instead of a companion that cares for us as God created it to do. We treat others as a means to an end instead as ends in themselves. The world is full of individual and corporate sin that have become necessary in a way by how we have structured our world. It's nasty, and it needs attention. Indeed, we live in tension. We live with joy on the one hand and difficulty and struggle in the other. We live with the vision of Mary as she proclaimed today in the reading from Luke. The Magnificat, as it is called, lives in tension, recognizing that there is the lowly, but they are the favored of God. It holds reality and the purposes of God in tension. But we must, must hold both in tandem to be real. To live only with the joy alone is to put our heads in the sand and ignore that as the Body of Christ, we are called to bring creation to more completeness through our action and love. To hold joy alone is sit in the white tower and expect God to do everything when God constantly calls us to be the peacemakers and the love bearers. On the other hand, to only concentrate on the darkness of our world is to work without hopefulness. There is no energy; there is no guidance when we do that. As a result, we become depressed. We rely upon ourselves, give into despair and become burnt out. Neither is life abundant. Neither is being faithful.

Christ said, and we always remember: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." The world needs Christians to never stray from the tension. Sometimes the

world really stinks. It's easy to look at the world in tones of black-and-white, but it isn't. We must lift a theology that respects and fosters the best for creation, but, at the same time, we need cars to drive, we need to heat our homes, we need energy to fuel our lives until we get something better. We need to pollute in order to keep people warm. The system is complicated. This is the tension. We can easily become depressed and turn off the television to concentrate on something we think is in our control. The problems are indeed complicated and long lasting. Yet, when we do that, we put our heads in the sand; that is not what Christ did. That's not what we're called to do by Christ. Instead, we live into the tension. We live into a lifetime of Advent, knowing that the Lord's promises are not fully complete and that we still have tasks as God's people. In the meantime, we sing: the Lord has come; the world is joyful, but we also work to make joy lasting as representatives of Christ. The Kingdom grows; there are growing pains as it happens, but it is worthwhile.

We have another tool in our Advent toolbox: joy. Christ came to show us joy and to create in us joy. Christ is the source of our joy, but it also requires that we do as Christ taught us for our joy to be complete. We love one another; we seek the benefit of one another. We recognize that Christ came to bring joy to all creation as well as the people of the world. At the same time, we recognize there is a tension. Our joy is not fully complete. The same creation we know praises Christ with us is groaning. Our neighbors here and around the world are in deep need. We can extend our joy when we are good stewards of all Christ gave us, including the world around us. We together sing the praises of our God; we together recognize that Christ came for our benefit. Let us sing together "Joy to the World," while recognizing that the world is yet to fully receive the Kingdom, and, for now, we live in tension... and that's a big part of being a Christian today. Amen and Amen.