

## “Unexpected Joy”

Liturgical Date: Advent 3 (A)

Primary Text: Psalm 146, also references other lessons of Isaiah 35, James 5:7-11, and St. Matthew 11:2-15

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the third Sunday in Advent, is Psalm 146 and the other lessons-particularly the Gospel-are referenced as well. The title of the sermon is “Unexpected Joy”.

We have now reached the third Sunday of Advent, and thus the third candle on our Advent wreath has been lit. And there is something different about that candle, isn't there? It is a pink, or rose color among the four blue. Why? Each candle traditionally represents a theme and the pink candle communicates “joy”. Advent today is often seen as a season of joyful anticipation. I mean, we already have had two pretty joyful Services this Advent season with the “Hanging of the Greens” and our Children’s Christmas program. Our Psalm for today is joyous, beginning and ending as each of the last five Psalms of the Psalter do, with *“Praise the Lord!”*

But traditionally Advent has not been seen as a season of pure joy. In the early church it was more a penitential season like Lent, and its liturgical color was (and still is in some churches) purple. There was an emphasis on fasting and the Hymn of Praise is still omitted from the liturgy. So the pink candle on the third Sunday was a time when a little influx of joy was acceptable. Over time, how many Christians observe Advent has evolved, partly because the Christmas season has extended earlier and earlier in the calendar year with all of its upbeat gatherings, music, and other festivities. I would not advocate going back to Advent being completely somber, but at the same time we would do well to solemnly remember that the reason that

the Christ Child came was because we were lost in our sin-not so that we could drink eggnog around a blazing yule log while wearing gaudy sweaters. Our Epistle from Romans 5 reminds us that we need to be patient. There certainly was a lot of patience required as the Jewish people awaited the Messiah. There is certainly patience that must be exercised on our part as we await the Second Coming of Jesus on the Last Day. In the Gospel Lesson we read about a discouraged John the Baptist who languishes in prison. Not much joy there.

But joy would come. As Christians we are not always happy, but we should be joyful. This is because joy is something that should be deep-rooted and not based on our current circumstances-as happiness often is. It is said that “God works in mysterious ways” and He does in that how He delivers joy is often unexpected. Isaiah 35 speaks of a desert of all places becoming of place of water and bloom. Even the birth of Jesus, which we prepare to celebrate, seemed like an unlikely place for joy to emerge from: a small town, a working-class family, a rude stable, just some shepherds showing up that first night. And of course the ultimate joy from an unexpected place was the saving work of the cross. Dying the death of a criminal on a Roman instrument of execution, Jesus Christ becomes the source of eternal joy in defeating sin and death itself.

So in today’s sermon I want to share somewhat of a “State of the Church” address as we prepare to close out another calendar year and have our year-end voters meeting. I also want to share a testimony of how God has brought me unexpected joy, even though I should have known it was there all along. I feel a little bit like the President in the State of the Union Address saying, “The state our church is strong,” but where as sometimes politicians tell us things they want us to hear whether they are true or not, I

do really mean that. We can join with the Psalmist in verse 2, *“I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.”*

But let's back up one year for a moment. At this time last year, the picture did not look so rosy for our congregation. By the traditional measures used to judge the health of a congregation we were facing some challenges. The two indicators people often look at are referred to as counting “nickels and noses” meaning how much money is coming in and how many people are in the pews. Without going into the whole story of how this congregation came to be-which is a testimony of God's providence in itself-we had pretty humble beginnings with the number of people committed to beginning the congregation in the single digits. But God provided all the funding we needed and there were people who came pretty quickly. There were new converts and generous givers and our first full year of having weekly Services in 2016 saw us averaging 22.5 people on Sunday and 15.8 on Wednesday. But then it got a little more difficult. Some of the people who had joined us moved away. A few unfortunately became inactive. And we had some leave and join other churches. So at the end of 2018 our Sunday attendance was down to 17.2 and Wednesday to 13.1 with some Services being in single digits. Our 2019 budget faced a shortfall of almost \$9,000, which was about 25% of our budget. We had actually spent a lot of time formulating policies and procedures and our Constitution and Bylaws had been approved by District. So we could charter as a congregation, but the Council (with my support) decided to hold off on chartering until we believed the ministry was viable long-term. Yikes!

I can tell you that I never gave up hope because I believe that God had placed me here and placed His people here for a reason. But I can also tell

you that there were some discouraging moments for me too. Honestly, I was not always focusing on the joy of the Lord. Most of you know that I work a full time job as an online teacher in addition to being a pastor as well as a part time job driving with Uber when I get a “spare” moment. So I believed that I was working hard, but maybe I needed to do more. Maybe I wasn’t doing enough to help the church grow. With the situations in my life, could God use me to do what needed to be done? There was definitely some questioning and wrestling with God.

But in prayer and calling out to God, I received answers. God speaks through His Word. Verses 5-6 of Psalm 146, *“Blessed is He whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forevermore.”* You see if God can create the earth, the sea, and everything else, He can surely accomplish His purposes in Commerce or anywhere He pleases.

Our Gospel text from St. Matthew 11 is a great lesson when we face doubts about God’s way of doing things. John the Baptist, that great prophet who prepared the very way of the Messiah, had been put in prison for preaching and drawing the ire of King Herod, and especially his wife Herodias, when he preached against their sin. So by John’s calculation he was working hard, doing everything God had wanted him to do and all it got him was languishing in prison. So the question that he asks Jesus through two of his disciples is a rather shocking one for the forerunner of the Messiah to ask, *“Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?”* Basically, Jesus are you the guy? Are you really this Messiah that we have been waiting for? The answer that Jesus sends back is one that gives examples that we see in our Psalm and Old Testament Lesson. Verse 5, *“The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed,*

*and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them*". Jesus is saying that these are all things the Messiah would do, He is doing those things, and therefore He is the Messiah.

So in pondering our "nickels and noses" dilemma, God impressed upon me through prayer and study of His Word that I was looking at the wrong things. I already knew that, as John the Baptist did, but my sinful nature needed a swift kick to the rear end too. Our Lutheran Confessions in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession tell us based on the Word what the true Church is, "*The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.*" So as I pondered the Church being the people of God I asked myself: Do we at Christ the King have people that love Jesus? Do we preach the Gospel? Do we believe in God's Word? Do we reach out to our members who are sick or hurting? Do we pray faithfully? Do we Biblically administer Baptism and the Lord's Supper? The answer to all those questions was "yes". I found nothing in the Bible or Lutheran Confessions that said that the faithfulness of a Church is measured or defined on how many people were attending nor in how much money was received. The clear message was keep doing what we are doing. Remain faithful. Preach the Word. Love each other. The power is not in our flesh, but the Spirit. Be patient. Leave the results to God. Maybe God wants us to be a small, but faithful congregation. And we should find joy in that. And if He wants to grow us, He will.

Well, 2019 has been an astounding year. Almost immediately our financial blessing came. Trinity restored our funding for 2019 when someone introduced a resolution at their voters meeting. Two other congregations, Christus Victor and Living Faith, sent completely

unexpectedly large donations. Individuals sent money in. Not only was the deficit eliminated we have gone into a significant surplus.

And beginning with the very first Sunday in January, God began sending visitors. Our attendance is up over 30% this year to almost an average of 23 people on Sundays and 49% on Wednesdays to 19.5. Furthermore we had an opportunity to share our sermons and teachings on Sermon Audio. Over 5,000 sermons have been accessed with 1,000 unique visitors to the webpage as we are touching the nation and world with the Gospel. Finally, in August chartering became a reality with Christ the King becoming an official congregation of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. *Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!* It has been a year of joy. Perhaps this was unexpected to me or to some of you, but it shouldn't be. As Psalm 146:10 states, *"The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations."*

We also must ask ourselves why do we want more people here anyway? If it is so we can proudly say "our church is growing, we have this many new members" or so that we can look good on a Synodical annual report, then we miss the point. We want more people to be here because this means that more people are hearing the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. More people are being connected to Jesus through the hearing of God's Word, studying the Bible, receiving the Sacraments, praying together, and being in fellowship with other believers for encouragement and strength for living for Christ. More contributions mean that more ministry can be done. These are the reasons that we should find joy in this type of growth.

But I want to close with this thought. What if the numbers hadn't changed this year? What if we see a decline in 2020 or at some point in the future? I pray that we don't, and I pray in thanksgiving that God gave us

such an increase in 2019. However, we must remember that congregational health is not primarily about “nickels and noses”. We measure those things for sure, but what God calls us to do is to remain faithful. We are to stand steadfast in His Word no matter what cultural pressures to change or retreat from the truth may be. We are to be faithful witness of the saving Gospel not only here inside these walls, but out there in the community and world. And in that we can have joy. We can see streams break forth in the desert and plants blossom. I pray that we continue to see financial and numerical growth in 2020, but above all I pray for spiritual growth. Through ups and downs in dollars and numbers, God is there and faithful. As St. James urges in 5:7, *“Be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.”* Psalm 146:8, *“The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.”*

The peace of God, which passes all understand, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.