

Christmas Message: "Joy in Hard Times" The Rev. Brent Damrow

Christmas Eve. It is packed, isn't it? It is packed with so many images. It is packed with so many lines. It is packed with so much truth that any of them or all of them could be enough for this night, for this year, or for even a lifetime of faith. We have already gotten to one of those lines. And in case you missed it, it came in our opening hymn. It came in the third verse. After that second verse where those choirs of angels sing with such embellishment, where descants bring us to the beauty of just how great God is. After all of those flourishes, after all of that that makes our hearts sore, it happened at the very beginning of the third stanza, organ and voice trained on a single line in unison that we dare not miss it: "Yea, Lord, we greet thee." The stunning truth that God comes to us, and that we have the chance on this night to be face to face with the Eternal, face to face with Perfect Love, face to face with the transforming Christ. It would be enough to stay on that line for this entire night and maybe for the whole year to come, our whole lives shaped by the truth that face to face we come. Near the end of the service will be another of those lines. I'm not going to ruin it for you, but it comes in The Christmas Creed, and I will point it out before we get there.

But there's a line that's about to appear in the readings, one that I wanted to sure you were aware of, so that when it came you wouldn't miss it. So that when it comes, you will think about it. You will do what Mary does, which is ponder it in your heart. The angel comes and says, "Do not be afraid." Then the angel says, "For I am bringing you good tidings of great joy for all the people." Good tidings. Great joy. All people. Do not be afraid. That is enough. Tonight you will hear good tidings of great joy in many ways, even if not in those words.

And throughout Advent here in this particular church, we have been drilling down into words. We have been looking at what each of the themes for each of the weeks means. We have explored in depth words like hope, peace, joy and love. We have looked at where they come from and what they mean, where they show up in the Bible, and perhaps most importantly, what do we do with them this Advent season. And/or what do those words expect from us with our next breath. I liked it. I've enjoyed it. It's meant a lot to me. And so tonight I want to take a look at those words "good tidings" and "great joy," and see what they have to say to us on this night and in the days to come.

Good tidings. Tidings. News. Updates delivered to anxious people waiting. I know none of us have been affixed to the news this past year. I know none of us have been anxious waiting to hear the latest update on any number of things. I know none of us, certainly not me. In the Bible, especially leading up to this moment in Bethlehem, that phrase "good tidings" was almost always news coming of victory in battle. Deliverance offered, well, at least for that moment, at least for that breath, at least for that news cycle. Well, of course, until the next crier came in with tidings, whether they might be good or not so good. We have all faced a year where tidings seem to be on every breath.

There have been some tidings of great joy, haven't there? There have been births and marriages, there have been discoveries in health and wholeness, there have been tidings that have made you just want to shout from the rooftops and to hug everyone, even if we can't. There have been tidings of great sorrow. There has been death and loss and grief, and stress beyond stress. And

there have been many tidings somewhere in between, most of them complicated and many of them complicating. But I think we have learned in these last nine months that tidings, no matter how overwhelming, whether good or ill, they can and do swamp us. And we need to make time and reality for that. And then eventually, they do ebb. They dissipate. They lessen. Even if they might come crashing back. That's how tidings work. We've learned that no matter how loud the voice or how convicted the delivery of the crier, that eventually the tidings we hear through news and other outlets get replaced with other tidings. They get lost in the din of the world. They slip through our fingers. We anxiously crane our necks and ears for the next tidings to come, and hope and pray that they are good. The angels, oh, they bring good tidings. And tonight you will find them. But I hope it's not the tidings you latch onto, because they are ephemeral and they can slip away.

The angels, if you remember, bring tidings pointing to something far deeper, far stronger, far more enduring. Tidings of great joy. And that joy that we remember tonight is singular. And it is focused. And yet it reveals itself in countless ways with every breath. That joy is the joy of the Christ Child. Love incarnate. Emmanuel. God With Us. And once we allow ourselves to catch the glimpse of that baby and realize what it really means, not just the sentiment of it, but what it really means. It ends up showing up all over the world and everywhere we look. Once we really realize that in our brokenness and need, in our loneliness, and in the worst of times, which they were, and which they are. Who would think that was what was needed. God did. God knew exactly what was needed. A new way. A way birthed in fragility and love and connection and caring. A way that would astound each and every one of us if we just let it.

I am so glad you are here tonight. But whatever you do, don't just leave here with the tidings in your ear, for they will fade. They will disappear into the din and dysfunction of this world. I want you to leave here yearning to dwell in the joy that is in that manger. To dwell in the joy that invites us to have Christ in us with every breath, and to follow that joy wherever it might lead. Not just born to us, but born in us. Don't leave here just clinging to the reality that somehow, some way, we evoked this beauty tonight. That somehow, some way, Andrea and Deryl brought these hymns and this singing into the depths of your hearts and unlocked some peace. Not just the candles that will flicker in the night, or even the beauty of the story. Instead, leave here obsessed with joy and that to which it points.

C.S. Lewis, in his highly introspective work, "Surprised by Joy," says that when he was young he wandered away from the church and away from his faith. He didn't do it because he was young and there were too many demands in that faith. He didn't do it because he disagreed with the principles of the faith or the depth to which we are called to wrestle. He said he left, instead, because the great truths of the Bible, the great traditions like this night that we somehow let slip into nostalgia. And nostalgia just couldn't hold up to the challenges of the world.

It got me thinking that in many ways, for me, Christmas Eve is like reading a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I don't know if you know him. He was the pastor and professor, the one who was complicit in plotting to not just resist Hitler but to assassinate him, the one who ended up getting martyred. His books usually have short titles. "Life Together." They are usually tiny little thin books. They beckon you to pick them up and sit down in a cozy chair with a cup of tea. How are they like Christmas Eve for me? I look at my copy of "Life Together," and notice that in the first

26 pages, Bonhoeffer speaks from conviction and strength, exactly what C.S. Lewis wanted. He speaks in ways of such lofty principles and goals and ideas of how life in Christ really works, how it binds us together, how it turns us into caring for each other, how it makes us better, the world better, and makes everything more beautiful. I found that every single page was earmarked at the top and sometimes at the bottom, sometimes twice. Almost every third line was underlined. There were even three or four “amens” written with capital letter and exclamation points. One of them had four exclamation points. To me, the beginnings of Bonhoeffer’s books are always like Christmas Eve – so much packed in, so much joy, so much beauty, you just love it.

And then always for Bonhoeffer, in this case around page 26, he asks the question, “So what?” So what does this mean for our life? So what does this mean for our calling? What does this mean for the demands – and let me just tell you, remember Bonhoeffer was willing to be executed for his faith. Bonhoeffer took everything seriously. The second part of Bonhoeffer’s books are what happens after this night, what happens after the candles fade. It is that task of living deeply into each of those moments. It is sometimes the hard work, but always the joyful work of following passion where it might lead.

C.S. Lewis eventually found Norse mythology. He eventually found opera. He eventually found Wagner. He found many things that stirred for him things that were bigger than he was, even though he never believed the depth of their claims. But what it allowed him to do is eventually come face to face with this claim tonight and on Easter, who Christ is and why it matters. Joy that points always outward and bigger. C.S. Lewis found resonance and a future through joy and he said, friends, if you’ve never experienced joy, this will sound like rambling to you. But if you have, you know exactly what I’m talking about and why it matters.

There have been tidings this year of all kinds. I have watched the flock of this congregation as it has dealt with this year. It has not been easy. But Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama remind us that joy is not the opposite of pain or even sorrow. But joy is what allows us to be in the midst of everything and honestly be able to accept the beauty of breath, the beauty of life, and the beauty of our calling, even and especially when things aren’t good for us or for the larger world.

I have marveled at how you intrepid folks have committed to going deeper, deeper into our faith, deeper into service and love of neighbor, deeper into practices like prayer, study and worship, deeper commitment. And what I have noticed in my myriad of conversations with you is the joy that has erupted in doing so, the passion for continuing to follow faith deeper and deeper. Don’t get me wrong. In the very next breath those same people will talk about sorrow and being overwhelmed. I got a beautiful email this morning to that very effect of how overwhelmed the person was, and yet how overjoyed the person was with their practices, with their God, and with their love of neighbor. Allowing that joy to come allows us to keep both pain and wellness together. It is coming to meet the fullness of any situation, just like God came on Christmas Eve in fullness to meet us.

So friends, listen carefully to this story. Do listen for line after line of good tidings. But when this is all over and when we have blown out our candles, I hope and pray that you have latched on to the joy of the manger. That you have latched on to the joy of Christ himself. So that when

we leave here, when we turn to face the world and our role in it, we are not merely reveling in good tidings. We are instead headlong, recklessly, rambling, and seeking after the joy that comes through life in Christ this day and every day. This moment and every moment. This challenge and all the challenges yet to come.

Friends, take a breath and get ready, not just to hear the greatest story ever told, but to absolutely be part of it. And in it, may you find joy. Amen.