

Sermon December 12 2021 JaQuan Beachem 3rd Advent

SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

SERMON: RAISING (a bundle of) JOY The Rev. JaQuan Beachem

So here we are again together, on this third Sunday of Advent! The theme is Joy.

A dear friend reminded me, as I reflected on this sermon, that “all is not calm, and all is not bright” in our world right now, as we move through this liturgical season of Advent. And so, if *all is not calm and all is not bright...* Where is joy? Or what does joy look like in this season? As the sunlight vanishes by 5pm, and homes, churches, and communities in our nation have been displaced and ravaged by tornadoes, I implore you to reflect on --- where is joy in this season?

We are diving into the Gospel of Luke this morning. We take a look back at the beloved story of the birth of a bundle of joy that was sent incarnate to save our world, to provide a model of how we might seek joy through displacement, seek joy through brokenness, seek joy when all may not be calm and bright.

Will you pray with me? Heavenly One, we come to you today first to say thank you. Perhaps our hearts are heavy, our minds clouded with to-do’s. I ask that you would allow us to rest in this moment in this sanctuary or in our own homes. May you open our ears to receive a word from you. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Beloveds, I would like to speak to you today from a message titled "*Raising (a bundle of) Joy.*" Raising joy.

They were on the run. The journey took several long days and cold nights as they traveled over high hills and through the dry desert. When they arrived, tired and weary, they entered a crowded village.

They were on the run. The parents of the soon-to-be-born Savior, Mary and Joseph traveled a great distance to find refuge, a safe place to rest and bring new joy into the world. As you can see, the bundle of joy did not arrive without encountering some struggle.

Mary and Joseph were on the run. From Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem. Jerusalem. They were on the run. Joy can be hard to find. At times you might have to chase it.

They were on the run. The bounty was out. Our society does not always know how to operate in modes that foster joy. The man in power in their time, Herod, had dispatched an order to have the coming joy eliminated. Mary and Joseph were on the run. Joy can be elusive.

Joseph, the one who was part of David's lineage, would stand in the gaps for his beloved, the one he was engaged to. Joseph -- despite his age, despite what people would say about how his beloved conceived joy -- pressed on. Joseph committed to Mary, despite her context. We ought to do the same with joy. Joseph was running with Mary, attempting to protect the joy she was carrying within her. Joy must be nurtured. Mary and Joseph came to a crowded village. Mary and Joseph struggled to find a destination to rest and to place their joy.

Our society does not always know what to do with or how to hold joy. Our society does not always know how to make room for joy.

On the run, tired and weary, they found a stable. They found a manger. A feeding trough. A feeding trough is the place in which a Savior was born.

Friends, though all may not be bright and calm, joy can still be delivered. Each of us has a role in delivering joy in our homes and communities! We have a responsibility to raise joy.

A dear one, as I was reflecting on our Advent theme, called my attention to Dr. Brittney Cooper's text, "Eloquent Rage." An interesting place to seek some nuggets about joy. Professor Cooper discusses insights of what joy is, what it can be, and where it might come from.

The first nugget is, "Joy arises from an internal clarity about one's purpose." Beloved, what would you say in this moment that your purpose is here? What would you say your purpose is? In identifying and engaging in our purposes, we birth joy!

Joseph recognized his newfound purpose. I may not know how he defined it exactly. But I think from the stories we can infer that love and justice were pieces of his purpose. One can deduce

this by his decision to remain by Mary's side. On his decision to remain an instrument of God to move with one who was almost cast aside in her society.

By remaining on Mary's side, even when the journey was rough, when what was to come was unclear, Joseph chose love. Joseph's choice to love Mary, and thereby the bundle of joy she was carrying -- regardless of if this child was "his" or not as we define it -- allowed joy to be brought into the world. Joseph placed joy and love above the eyes of society, above the social norms of his time, above his reputation and questions of his integrity.

The decision was public and bold. The text tells us that Joseph registered with Mary. His choice was clear. Joseph was not absentee. This act places Joseph on the side of justice.

Joseph ran so that Jesus could one day walk. Joseph loved so that Jesus could love. If Joseph and Mary defied social norms -- how could Jesus not? Raising joy! Our actions today plant seeds for tomorrow.

I believe that Joseph could only have made the decisions he did -- journeying through the struggle, journeying through the darkness, when all was not calm and bright -- with joy, with an internal clarity of his purpose.

Further, Dr. Cooper writes that maintaining joy and the capacity for joy is critical to the struggle. In this season of anticipation, I believe that our practices of hope and peace, that we have been reviewing this season, create room for us to expand our capacities to receive joy and to foster it. Even amidst a pandemic, even in the throes of holiday blues, even in the grievances of loved ones, lost, and plans uprooted.

Again, friends, I ask you... What do you see your purpose in life to be? For this is where your joy lies. It is God given!

Professor Cooper reminds us that joy is critical in reinvigorating our capacities for new life and new vision. Now, more than ever, we need new visions. Mary and Joseph knew this. Mary and Joseph knew that something had to give. That change was crucial and imminent, and that this world needed to be turned upside down. And so they ran to raise joy.

Growing up in Georgia, going to Lake Lanier to see the Festival of Lights was a favorite tradition of mine. At this light show, you could drive or walk through to see familiar cartoon characters, nutcrackers, the little drummer boy, Santas, all shining brightly in lights. My favorite part of this light show was driving through these tunnels of everchanging lights that seemed to teleport you into a whole new world. What was once kind of a dark straightaway surrounded by trees became a kaleidoscope of possibilities. This was joyful experience for me growing up.

I recall, too, there being a slight air of disappointment when we would make it to the end of the path. My mom noticed this and would offer me a sweet treat. This offering would hold me over until the next year. Let us not become so bogged down by what we may be missing or grieving in this moment, that we miss the seeds of joy that are blooming around us. To this day, I continue to

be enamored by the lights that seemingly magically appear on homes that surprise me on nighttime drives.

Friends, sometimes we have to untangle some things -- like string lights or our emotional attachments -- to notice joy. We are never too old to do some untangling and to experience joy, to receive joy, and to nurture joy. At times we must unpack the things that we have pushed to the back of our minds, the items we have hid up in the attic and allowed to lie dormant for awhile. For it is in the unpacking of these things that we can heal and therefore experience the joy that abounds and surrounds us.

Professor Cooper, in “Eloquent Rage,” warns that when we lack joy, we have diminished our capacity for self-love and for empathy. To evoke joy, we need empathy. Again, I would say that a piece of Joseph’s purpose was joy, because he was able to show empathy to his engaged beloved.

Empathy allows affinity. Affinity allows allyship and solidarity. These are virtues that we cannot leave behind. We cannot engage any of these virtues if we are not tending to ourselves and what we need. If we’re not doing some untangling. We cannot -- we must not -- dim our lights, for this is how we raise joy!

Scripture tells us that *weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning*. Perhaps you are thinking, “Okay, Rev. Beachem, I’ve heard that one before.” And I respond to you with “I hear you. This joy work can be a struggle.” I respond to you that this justice work can be a struggle. In this pandemic moment -- as we convene to discern how we ought to re-gather most safely with the inclusion of as many as possible -- we are continuing to move in the struggle.

Joy may be the boost that we need to press on in these trying times. As we press on, who knows what joyful surprises we may encounter along the way, such as the Festival Chorus Concert that took place in this sanctuary last night, or the labyrinth installation outside, which I got to see for the very first time at night. It was quite beautiful.

As we press on to give birth to joy in a dark time, who knows who might meet us on the way. Who knows who we might meet along the way, and what bundles they may be carrying. As we press on, seeking out joy, we never know who might shower us with gifts of love and hope and peace, like the Magi and the shepherds did at the birth. Gifts that compel us to shout: *Glory to God in the highest!*

A beloved song of mine claims that *joy is not a thing that the world has given; therefore the world cannot take it away*. I believe this to be true. I think Mary and Joseph did as well.

Mary and Joseph were on the run. Mary and Joseph delivered joy on the run, against the odds. They remind us that joy can arise where you least expect it, in a smelly manger among the animals. Joseph with Mary reminds us that each and every one of us has a role to play when it comes to birthing, nurturing, and raising joy in this world!

However, we, unlike Mary and Joseph, have a bit of a head start because we know how the story ends. Or rather, how the story continues to unfold. And that the story is not over just yet, praise God! May this bring you joy as well. For we, too, are on the run. Running toward a new -- toward our next -- normal.

Like the angel reminded Mary, "Do not be afraid." Instead, find things and people to treasure, like your favorite Christmas ornament or a beloved book. Find new delights and treasure them as Mary did. Be faithful and defy the odds like Joseph did. With a joy that compels you to run in the name of love and justice.

May it be so, friends. Amen.

Rev. JaQuan Beachem, an advocate & artist born and groomed in the suburbs of Atlanta, is a Master of Divinity graduate of Yale Divinity School. Rev. Beachem is serving as the Director of Community Development & Spiritual Formation at Andover Newton Seminary. In their leisure, JaQuan enjoys jamming out to music, honing his yoga practice, tasting a new recipe, and noticing things bloom! Rev. Beachem will lead worship through Advent.