

## The Complexity of Joy

Be with us in our waiting, illuminate your path for us, and help us hear your wisdom. Oh God, our great creator, Amen.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, where we light the candle of joy. We do this in recognition of how close we are to the coming birth of Christ. We begin turning our attention to how joyous the mysteries of that day truly are. We begin turning towards the Manger. Thinking again of the light that Jesus will bring into the world.

This time of year has always been full of complexity for me.

I didn't really dig into the meaning of the Advent wreath until I was a Lay Eucharistic Minister at my sending parish. I remember having an extensive conversation with my priest one year about the wreath and why we lit the candles in the order we did, the colors, and what they meant. We got to the pink one and he told me it represented joy. I asked what I should do if I just didn't have a whole lot of joy in my heart this time of year I asked was that a problem? I told him about how complicated the holidays were for me and that of course I find joy in the story of Christ's birth and the idea of Jesus bringing light into the world, but I also had grief and pain around the reality of what this time of year was for me and so many. He invited me to the Blue Christmas service, which quickly became one of my favorites of the season.

It allowed me to be fully present in the reality of my humanity. However messy, during a time of year when perfection and putting on a good exterior seemed to be what the outside world was expecting.

It's one of the many reasons I love our Blue Christmas service. It helps recognize the complexities of holding joy, grief, excitement, pain, anticipation, and

all of our very complicated human emotions this time of year. All the things we are and all the many things we are not.

In our Gospel for today, we encounter John, not as the Baptist but as a witness.

As the text says of John he is “a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.” At the same time, John is witnessing to those present. We also learn a great deal about what John isn’t. He is not the light, or the Messiah, nor is he worthy to untie the thong of the one who is to come’s sandal. Through John’s powerful witness, we hear him quote Isaiah as he says, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord.” With this quote, John bears witness about the ONE who is to come. He helps shape the narrative of who Jesus is and his identity as Messiah.

In John’s gospel, witness is the beginning of faith — bearing witness to the Word of Jesus Christ is the foundation for the emergence of human faith in God.

To be a witness to joy is to honor not only what we feel joy is but also what it isn’t for those we love and serve within our communities.

To see someone as they are. To allow them to come as they are, and not as we wish them to be is the radical welcome which says, all those things you aren’t, are just as important as all the things you are. You are a beloved child of God, no exceptions. This is our witness to the world. This is our active faith. This is how we show up for the people in our community by showing them they are loved. We do that by showing our joy for our faith, our witness.

This can be an exceptionally difficult time of year for so many people. Joy has many definitions. It can be connected to a deep, intimate connection to Christ, a rejoicing of the spirit. It can be a feeling of delight, pleasure, or happiness. It

can also be elusive or passing and hard to define for those who struggle with emotions or who are experiencing grief, or having a rough time.

Being human is complicated and more and more complex as time passes.

In contemplating many of the things John was not, we can also find the message of who John was. He was a witness.

As we move into a very complex time of year for so many, how might we bear witness to a miracle that has been used as a weapon against others? How do we continue to bear witness to pain while also bearing witness to the joy present in those very same moments? Over the next week, this text is calling us not to forget all we have heard in our advent journey thus far.

We must still keep watch for the God moments around us, helping God break us open allowing hope, peace and joy into our hearts in God's time in ways only God can. Advent is a season of waiting and for those of us who may still be waiting for hope, peace and, or joy. Today's text reminds us that sometimes the gospel witness isn't about what we have or are but sometimes about who or what is yet to come. As we light the third advent candle, we continue to look towards what is to come with joyous anticipation. Remembering the complexities of our humanity and where we are in this moment, not where we have yet to travel.

My prayer for us this day is that we see the light of this third candle as an invitation to bear witness to the needs of our complex world. Deeply listen for the needs of our community, within and outside the walls of our congregation, and know God walks alongside us always on the journey ahead.

**Amen**