

Hope, then peace, and now Joy on this 3rd Sunday of Advent. Am I the only one who thinks it's a little bit strange that we're already at Joy in this series? Not to be a Scrooge or anything, I'm all for Joy! But if I were putting together the order of Advent services off the top of my head, I'd probably say Hope, then Peace, then Love, and then Joy.

When I started prepping for this week, I actually wondered if I'd inadvertently switched Love and Joy in the order of the series. But when I checked the worship materials we're using this Advent, there it was. Hope, Peace, and Joy as #3.

Because I have a compulsive need to be right about everything, I did a quick google search and learned that there are actually multiple traditions of the order of Advent themes. Some traditions do have Love before Joy, and some even change up the order on a yearly rotation depending on which Gospel is being used for the Christmas story. Interesting. To me, anyway... 😊

It seems like Joy should come at the end. Advent is about waiting, about hope and anticipation and longing. And then Christmas is when Jesus is born and we celebrate with Joy. The Joy comes after the gift, that's the way it usually goes. Just like the egg comes before the chicken. Right?

Joy comes at the end. Or does it? The Bible actually gives a wide range of experiences of Joy.

In the Christmas story of Mary and Elizabeth, we hear echoes of the story of Hannah, their ancestor from ancient Israel. Hannah was married to a man named Elkanah, who also had another wife. The other wife had multiple children, sons and daughters, but Hannah had none. And although Elkanah loved Hannah, she was jealous of his other wife and her children.

Every year when Elkanah's family made the trip to the Jerusalem temple, Hannah would make sacrifices and beg God to give her a child. *"O LORD Almighty, look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son."*

One year, Hannah was in the Temple making her desperate plea, the high priest Eli saw her praying. Hannah was so passionate in her prayer that Eli thought she must be drunk. But when he approached her, Hannah explained her situation, that she was not drunk but desperate.

Eli had compassion for Hannah, so he blessed her and asked that God would grant her request. And it happened: Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. And when Samuel was old enough, Hannah returned to the Temple, and gave the boy to Eli to serve God in the Temple.

This time, Hannah's prayer was not of desperation but of joy:

1 Then Hannah prayed and said: "My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my honour is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. 2 "There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God."

And her song goes on, in all likelihood the model for Mary's song, the *Magnificat* (we heard today?) from the Christmas story in Luke 1. Hannah's story is also a Christmas story: In her deep need Hannah cried out to God, and God heard her cry and fulfilled her hope with the gift of a child. And Hannah responded with great joy.

This is the pattern of many stories in the Bible. In the Exodus story, God delivered the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, brought them away from Pharaoh and through the Red Sea. And when they were safely on the other side, Moses' sister Miriam led the Hebrews in a song and dance party for the ages: *"I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. 2 The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.*

Centuries later, when King David had finally defeated his enemies and brought peace to Israel, he brought the Ark of God's Presence to his capital city of Jerusalem. This was the moment he had longed for, and as the Ark was brought into Jerusalem, David was overcome with Joy and started another dance party. And of course, David also sang: *Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. 9 Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. 10 Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.*

This is one pattern of Joy: we hope, we long, we ask, and when God answers our longing, we respond with joy.

Other times, though, the Joy comes in the middle, long before the conclusion is sure.

Jehoshaphat was king of Judah about four generations after the split between Israel and Judah. His kingdom was relatively small and vulnerable, and it wasn't long before several of their perpetual rival tribes, the Moabites and Ammonites, raised an army and marched against Judah.

The story is told in 2 Chronicles 20. Jehoshaphat called for an assembly of Judah, to pray, men, women, and children. And Jehoshaphat prayed: *“O God, where is your justice and protection? We are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”*

In response, says the Chronicles, *“The spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah... he said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the Lord to you: “Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God's. Tomorrow go down against them... you will find them at the end of the valley... This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.”*
Then Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshiping the Lord.

They had heard from God, and they rejoiced. They only had words of promise, not the actual thing they wanted... but that was enough to bring Joy.

So the next day, Jehoshaphat formed up his army for battle. And then *When he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy splendor, as they went before the army, saying, “Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever.”*

Put the singers at the front! How'd you like to be part of that choir? 😊

*As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the Ammonites, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. **23** For the Ammonites and Moab attacked the inhabitants of Mount Seir, destroying them utterly; and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another.*

How's that for a pacifist story? In the face of Evil, stand and sing. Violence brings its own end. The Battle belongs to the Lord.

***27** Then all the people of Judah and Jerusalem, with Jehoshaphat at their head, returned to Jerusalem with joy, for the Lord had enabled them to rejoice over their enemies.**28** They came to Jerusalem, with harps and lyres and trumpets, to the house of the Lord.*

They literally rejoiced their way to victory. Their Joy came in the middle of the story, long before the outcome was decided.

The Joy of Christmas story is much like this. There is the promise of “God with us,” and there are angels and everything... but any pregnant woman like Mary will tell you the excitement of discovering that they’re pregnant is a long, long way from a healthy birth.

And even when the baby is born, it’s Jesus, who shall save his people from their sins, but that story’s not finished yet. There is joy even in the middle of the story, Joy at the promise of salvation long before we are saved.

Other times, the Joy comes even earlier.

The book of Acts chapter 16 tells the story of Paul and Silas in the town of Philippi in Macedonia.

16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. 17 While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." 18 She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

I guess that’s one way to deal with that annoying person at your work... please don’t try this at home! 😊

19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Stripped and beaten with rods, attacked by a crowd, then locked in a windowless cell with their feet in stocks.

And yet, *Midnight found Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.*

Now, I don't know exactly what they were singing. It might have been hymns of lament, funeral hymns. But tradition says that these were songs of praise. The early church was known for finding joy in the middle of suffering: James 1: **2** *My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, makes you mature and complete.* This is what Paul and Silas were doing, finding Joy in their trials, singing and praying so that the other prisoners were listening rather than sleeping.

Many of you know how the story ends: **26** *Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."*

29 *The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."*

32 *They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.*

And in the morning, the officials that had put Paul and Silas heard the story, and they came and apologized to them and set them free.

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, makes you mature and complete.

Sometimes Joy is a choice, a decision to embrace whatever situation we're in, to find God at work even when it looks like God is not.

We've seen Joy at the beginning, middle, and end. The Joy of thanksgiving after receiving God's good gifts. The Joy of Hope at the sound of God's voice in the middle of the story. The Joy of Choice even in suffering, when Joy is an intentionally cultivated response no matter what life brings.

But what about when there is no joy? Not every story has it. Not every person feels it. Some of us don't have whatever it is that Paul and Silas found in that prison, no matter how much we want it or how hard we look.

For those stories, the Joy of Christmas is a promise.

When a remnant of the Jewish nation returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, their first projects were to rebuild the Temple and the walls of the city. When they were finished, they had a service of dedication. It was meant to be a celebration, great Joy because they were back in their homeland and Exile was over.

And yet, while Ezra prayed and read to them from the Book of the Law, the people wept. They wept because they remembered the former beauty of the Temple and glory of the city—their replacements were a far cry from what had been. They wept because of the words of the Law—they recognized their guilt and their inability to keep God's commands even now. And they wept because the road and work had been so long and hard already, and they had so very far to go.

I think this is a likely setting for Psalm 126. The Heikman adaptation:

1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion (and promised to bring us back to Jerusalem)

we were like those who dream.

2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

3 The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

(But now, here we are, and reality has set in.)

4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the flash-flood of streams that form in the desert.

5 May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. - NRSV

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

*Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. - NRSV*

This is the Promise of God, that even our tears bear the seeds of Joy. Faith is the determination to plant whatever seeds we've been given, an act of hope and trust in the mystery of God.

This is Joy. Wherever we are in the spectrum of Joy this season, God meets us there. This is the promise of God-with-us. Amen.