

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – December 27, 2020 – Rejoice!
Isaiah 61:10-62:3 and Psalm 148:1-4

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

- I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
- 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.
- 62:1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.
- 2 The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give.
- 3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalm 148:1-14

- 1 Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
- 2 Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
- 3 Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
- 4 Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
- 5 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.
- 6 He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
you sea monsters and all deeps,
8 fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!
9 Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
10 Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds!
11 Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
12 Young men and women alike,
old and young together!
13 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his glory is above earth and heaven.
14 He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise for all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!

Over the past 100 years, we have learned a great deal about the human body. We now know, for example, about brain chemicals, such as endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin which are stimulated by things like food and exercise, presents and relationships. Each has an important role to play in regulating our mood. And each is associated with the pleasure center of our brain.

Elevated doses of these chemicals ultimately lead to euphoria. Just imagine a small child on Christmas Day whose windfall of presents overwhelms her coping mechanisms. With wide eyes and an increased heart rate, hyper-activity and high-pitched screams soon follow.

With age, our responses moderate and joy is found in other ways. We are grateful to receive Christmas cards from friends. We are thankful for the meal. We are soothed by a cup of hot chocolate. And time with family becomes the greatest gift.

This year, it wasn't the fear of missing out - this idea that everyone else was having a wonderful time while we were stuck spending the holiday isolated – that attempted to spoil the occasion for us. No. It was, instead, the nagging feeling that everyone was missing out. That everyone was isolated. That everyone was left wanting and hoping for more.

In the midst of this pandemic, many of you have confided in me about the profound sense of grief which has dominated much of 2020. For those of us living in the Global North, the present challenge is now even more pronounced as we endure the coldest, the shortest, and the darkest days of year. Understandably, we have grown weary - from the constant assault on our habits and from the daily strain on our collective well-being.

It's as if the pleasure centers of our brains have been short-circuited. The days are running together. And the end of this pandemic, while certainly in sight, remains so far off in the distance that we are often afraid to hope.

In our grief, we long to worship together. To sing the carols. To hear the sounds of Christmas Eve brass. We long to be reunited with our families at table and to raise a glass to us. But everything just feels so heavy. So fraught. So perilous.

Wiser voices among us are the ones who encourage our resilience, our curiosity, and our faithfulness. For while it is certainly difficult to give thanks in the midst of a pandemic, it is also essential. Therefore, we celebrate the “determination in every Zoom present-opening invite,” of “every tiny apartment Christmas tree where none ever stood before,” and of “every batch of not-quite-perfect cookies” lovingly created by a “pandemic chef” to re-create the joy of the season whether we can gather or not.”¹ Each of these are practices that shape our understanding and our identity, and they each remind us of the time-honored practices of the church.

¹ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/christmas-always-hope-no-different-093004473.html?guccounter=1>

You may recall that the apostle Paul, the prolific writer of much of the New Testament, experienced incredible hardship in the course of his life. He was a frequent target of forced confinement. He was a convenient scapegoat of regular beatings. And he was ultimately killed by adversaries who took his life on account of his faith in Jesus Christ.

Still, despite the expansive nature of his suffering, Paul continued to urge fellow believers to “rejoice always,” to “pray without ceasing,” and to “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Paul’s life rooted in the constancy of intentional spiritual practices. And these practices enabled him to remain both steadfast in his faith and firm in his convictions.

Friends, this isn’t merely the power of positive thinking. No. These practices help us to move beyond ourselves, beyond our own whims and circumstances, by freeing us from the temptation to rejoice only when we feel like it, or to give thanks only when circumstances go our way.² For if we are grateful only in the best of times, what we are really doing is grasping for God for our own convenience and in service of our own purposes. And whenever we pursue that

² Michael Battle, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume A*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 44.

path, we deny ourselves of the opportunity to more fully enter into the covenant that God has made with us.³

Today, we rejoice, not because we have just experienced the best Christmas in memory. Most likely, we haven't. And today we rejoice not in anticipation of the greatest New Year's on record. Because we already know how that will look and feel, as well. Instead, we rejoice in the knowledge that God's blessings are with us in the best of times, in the worst of times, and in every time in between.

At Christmas, we celebrate God's time – the in breaking of God's Word and the enfleshment of the promise. Out of the encompassing mystery, God comes to us in a familiar, bodily form, and dwells among us in our grief, in our anxiety, and in our pandemic fatigue. He finds us here, residing in our own personal wilderness, and calls to us in the silence and in the chaos. He summons us to service, and leads us in a song of praise. And as we immerse ourselves in the spiritual practices of our faith, we discover the power to rejoice.

May God be with you this Christmas and always. Amen.

³ Battle, 44.