

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
December 17, 2017 – 3rd Sunday in Advent
John 1:6-8, 19-28

What is more captivating than a child filled with joy? Visualize, if you will, a small child opening a gift and clapping their hands with delight? Imagine that child ... joy written all over her face as her mouth shapes a perfect circle, her eyes wide in amazement, and her hands thrown up in the air. We don't have to know what caused this delight, but we're absolutely clear what she is feeling!

Joy. It's contagious. Joy speaks volumes. It is a response to delight. And delight is a response to receiving more than one expected; more than one could have hoped for or imagined. Joy is that deep down sense that something wonderful is going on. Joy softens our edges and frees us up to respond spontaneously. And as I said, joy can be contagious.

I love the sense of joy. It permeates my whole being. I feel it often when we sing here together in church and there are moments of sound that reverberate all through me and the moment feels absolutely full and perfect.

I had an experience of profound joy recently. When our two sons came up to our home in Shawnigan for dinner. Sounds pretty ordinary but you need to know that until recently, neither son had a car so if we wanted to see them, Jim and I had to travel down to Victoria and take them out to eat. So last weekend, our two sons drove up to our home. I cooked them dinner; their favourite meal –

classy chicken, rice, cheese popovers and Moroccan salad. When I saw them lick their lips as I brought the food to the table and “ohh” and “ahh” for what they were about to receive, I felt total joy. I was feeding my sons and they loved what I was serving and all was perfect with the world.

Today is the third Sunday in Advent and the focus for today is JOY. Ahhh, the joy bit.

What is life like without joy? I know for me as a younger mother with kids at home, a business and a home to run, sports and music classes, cubs, church and, volunteer commitments to boot, all on a very tight budget, I knew too well what life was like without joy. There were those days I just got through the day as best I could. And it wasn't unusual for me to feel resentful with all that was on my plate. I didn't feel joy and I certainly didn't bring joy to others.

How do I know that?

Because when my sons were teenagers, they began to say to me, “Mama, why don't you go do something special for yourself?” Most people would be amazed and think, “Wow, your sons were so sweet!” Well, yes, my sons are great guys but they are also smart. My sons had learned that when I did something to take care of myself – something fun, creative or plain lazy - I was a much nicer person to be around!

Resentment has become a reliable guide for me. I learned midway through my parenting years that when I was resentful, I was obstructing joy. So when resentment built, I learned to pay attention. And it was amazing what a good teacher resentment was. For example, for years I did the family laundry. I didn't always enjoy it,

but wasn't resentful either. But once our sons became teenagers, I found myself feeling resentful every time I hit the basement stairs on my way to do laundry. I paid attention to what my resentment was telling me – "Why are you doing laundry for people who were perfectly capable of doing their own laundry?" So I stopped doing my sons' laundry and let them take it on. Thank you resentment for showing me that what makes sense at one point in time, can change and no longer make sense to do.

The same was true with my job as publisher of the magazine Jim and I started in the late 80's. After 15 years of writing, editing, selling ads and collecting overdue accounts for *Island Parent Magazine*, I was ready to move on. Jim was too. As we looked around for a buyer for our business, people were astounded, "How can you sell? It's such an exciting job. How can you give it up?" I could agree, "It was a wonderful job..... and it *will be* now for someone else." I'd gone from loving it, to being bored and restless. Time to move on. It took a while, but letting go of one thing, made room for something new and very different to arrive.

What has all this to do with the Gospel reading today?

Well, I may be stretching it a bit but in the reading from the Gospel of John just now, we heard, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." (John 1:6-8) In these few words we learn that John, who was baptizing folks in the River Jordan, had a key

role in God's plan. He and Jesus were inextricably connected in that he was *to witness or testify* to Jesus' presence and message.

If no one witnessed Jesus as he arrived in our midst, if no one testified to who he was and what he was about to do, what would we know about him today?

Just like John, to be in relationship with Jesus means to witness to his presence and action in our lives. The world needs our testimony. People need to hear authentic stories or accounts of how our lives have been touched and changed by the deep down knowledge and experience of the love of God. This is how we touch the lives of others, as we share the stories of our encounters, moments, dreams, nudgings. And especially when we can share the joy that has come into our lives as a result of our encounters with God. Stories point to the power of God moving in the world. And we all need to be reminded, inspired, encouraged and fed by these stories, these testimonies.

One of the most attractive ways we can share our connection with God, is through the joy we express in our daily lives. The joy that spills out, that is a response to all we have been given, and are given, each and every day. This joy, even in the midst of suffering, draws people, inspires people, and feeds people. Mother Teresa immediately comes to mind. In the midst of terrible poverty, as she toiled relentlessly to alleviate the suffering of those who were dying on the streets of India, compassion and joy burn through her eyes as she does the will of her God.

As a priest many people feel safe to share the profound moments, special moments, disturbing moments when they've been touched by the unexpected presence of God in their lives. People who don't believe in God tell me stories of encounters that surprised and changed them. And in hearing their stories I often feel the presence of the Holy. Tears, relief and profound joy seem to be expressions of Holy movement in people's lives.

Joy. When we follow our heart's desire, we are most likely to feel joy. When we do what we've always done, think we should do, or what we think we have to or else it won't get done, we kill the joy in us. And without the joy bit, people are not likely to be moved by our faith.

Hope, peace and joy. We are three weeks into Advent. We are encouraged to let go of those behaviours and thoughts that get in the way of hope, peace and joy arising in our lives. Soon we celebrate the coming of new life into the world, a vulnerable infant who will turn, and has turned, our world upside down in the name of Love. We await this earth changing event with joy, but also with trepidation. Because we are being asked to let go of what does not serve life to make room for this Son of God in our lives. To engage with him and continue his work.

We are not God; as John said, "I am not the Messiah." We're not responsible for the state of the world. We cannot control life. But like John, we are called to witness to the light. To receive the light, acknowledge the light, to become more light, share the light, and pass it on. And when we do, we will know that deep down joy of feeding

others, as we ourselves are being fed. And offering back to God, our
praise and thanksgiving for all we receive. With joy.

Amen.