

“Expectantly Waiting for Joy”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Philippians 4: 4-7
Zephaniah 3: 14-20

One of the best movies I have seen this year is “Inside Out.” It is another movie by Pixar, who brought us movies such as “Toy Story” and “Monsters, Incorporated.” While their movies are animated and primarily geared to children, the folks at Pixar have an uncanny knack for writing movies that speak to adults. At our house, that is one of the reasons we love their movies – as we all age, we laugh and appreciate new things each time we see them.

“Inside Out” tells the story of an 11-year-old girl named Riley. Riley’s family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco, because her dad changes jobs. What makes the movie special is that we view what’s happening to Riley by what’s going on inside Riley’s brain. Namely, we witness her emotions and how they interact to what is happening around her. There are five primary emotions that are the characters: Joy, Fear, Disgust, Sadness, and Anger. As always, the folks at Pixar have nailed it when it comes to our human reactions and emotions towards different events, especially the different ways we experience life as children, adolescents, and adults.

In the movie, Joy tends to be the leader of the group, as Riley is an overall happy kid. But when the family moves to a new location, and Riley starts to experience more Disgust, Fear, and Anger, the emotional hierarchy starts to become unraveled. Joy has always been the leader, the one to make sure that Riley is always happy. Joy believes that all memories need to be full of happiness, and any that have Sadness or other emotions are not helpful to Riley’s overall emotional health.

But what Joy learns – and what we learn – is that you can’t be happy in a vacuum. Joy is not immune from the other emotions we experience every day. One example of that in the movie is when one of Riley’s imaginary friends, Bing Bong, loses his coveted wagon. Joy and Sadness are with Bing Bong as he begins to cry. Joy’s first reaction is to try and distract him from his sorrow, wanting to cheer him up. But Sadness walks over to Bing Bong, consoles him, and allows him to cry it out. And once he’s had that space to be sad, he is fine and ready to continue on their journey together. Joy learns that there is a positive, important role for Sadness in the realm of emotions we experience as humans.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, the word that is on the Advent Wreath is "Joy." It is a word that immediately brings thoughts of happiness or excitement. For some of us, we can easily relate to the character in the movie, where we identify with memories from life that warm our hearts and cause our spirit to smile. Joy can be happy memories of Christmases past, or children playing innocently, or sharing special times with family and friends. For some of us, we can readily identify with Joy.

For others of us, Joy is hard to comprehend. Joy seems like a distant memory. Joy is difficult to identify with amid the stresses of joblessness, the dysfunction of family, the fear of the other, and the grief of loved ones who are gone. For some of us, Joy is a slap in the face, or is an insult to consider amid all that life seems to be throwing at us.

How can we expectantly await joy this Advent Season? Is it realistic to consider joy in light of the many other emotions we know and feel? How does God wish for us to find a balance in our emotional and spiritual waiting this Advent Season?

The two scripture lessons today speak of a future joy which God will bring, a joy which otherwise might be hard for God's people to comprehend. And in these Advent messages, perhaps we too hear the promise that God's joy is real and meaningful precisely because it comes out of the challenging situations we all experience.

The prophet Zephaniah was speaking to a people who were in exile, taken away by their enemies. Their home was behind them, their safety net was gone, and they were hopeless. Joanna Adams describes it this way: It's out of character for Zephaniah, one of the gloomiest of the Old Testament prophets, to offer this joyful song of promise: "I will remove disaster from you. I will gather the outcast. I will bring you home, says the Lord." Zephaniah took special delight in predicting "the day of the Lord," when things were going to turn out badly for the people of Judah and Israel.

Because the bright message of the lectionary reading is strikingly different from the rest of his prophecy, biblical scholars suggest that it was added during the Babylonian exile. What could be more reassuring to people who were far from home than to receive word that there was a place where they belonged.

What happened to our ancestors in faith was this. A foreign enemy had overrun their homes and destroyed their communities and their places of worship. They were bound as prisoners and hauled over hundreds of desert miles to a strange land, where they were forced to live among people whose language, religion, customs and habits were different from theirs ("Toward Home," Joanna M. Adams, Christian Century, December 12, 2006: 18).

And yet, into this gloomy, hopeless, joyless situation, Zephaniah speaks a prophetic word of joy. Twice in our passage today, the prophet promises the people: “The Lord, your God, is in your midst” (3:15,17). The people are promised that God will bring them home (3:20), and God will save the weak and helpless, “changing their shame into praise and renown in all the earth” (3:19). As one commentator puts it: Zephaniah, thank God, knows the future and wants us to get up and rejoice! The future will be different than the present and even different from the future that had been foreseen . . . Why do we listen to the prophets during Advent? Because centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ they were messengers of essential good news: “Do not fear . . . The Lord, your God, is in your midst” (Deborah Block, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 52).

In the spirit of the prophets, we hear Paul encouraging the church in Philippi to rejoice amid whatever may be weighing them down. On the surface, this passage may sound like a call to happiness, and Pharrell’s song, “Happy”, comes to mind. But that would be disingenuous to Paul’s use of the word “rejoice.”

When Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice,” he is not saying, “Be happy all the time.” The joy Paul speaks of is not something that can be pursued, say in the way we tend to pursue happiness as modern Americans. Instead, this joy is a longing that emanates from the center of our being as creatures of God. It is a deep desire to live joyfully in thanksgiving for all God has done for us. It is an expectant awaiting of what God will do next – in us, through us, for us – as we walk each day as disciples of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near” (4:5).

This is not a joy that is in denial of all that is happening in the world. Do you know where Paul wrote these words? From a dark Roman prison cell. He had every reason to be full of disgust or anger or sadness – anything but joy. But Paul exhorts the Philippians, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be known to God” (4:6). In his own witness, Paul is able, amid the trials and challenges he faced, to long for the joy of Christ that is promised this Advent Season.

I don’t want to give away the end of the movie, but one thing that becomes apparent throughout “Inside Out” is that joy-filled memories are not always born out of completely happy experiences. We witness in the movie that some of the most-treasured, joy-filled memories of Riley actually began from painful, sad, or challenging experiences. The character Joy could not see that earlier; it was only after walking alongside the other emotions – especially Sadness – that she could see that joy is intricately intertwined with the others. Joy does not exist in a vacuum, but it also is where Riley yearns to be, no matter where she might begin.

If you are full of Christmas cheer and desire that everything be perfect for Christmas to be a success, know that God yearns for you to know his everlasting joy which comes amid all situations and experiences – not just the happy ones.

If you are struggling to know joy this Advent, and your heart is hardened by family strife, work stress, or internal conflicts of faith, know that God yearns for you to know his everlasting joy, a joy which is rooted in the peace of God “which surpasses all understanding, guarding your hearts and mind in Christ Jesus.”

If you are overwhelmed by a present that seems void of hope, purpose, and joy, and all that is around you is darkness, know that “the Lord your God is in your midst,” and that he is coming “to save the lame and gather the outcast,” restoring all of our fortunes before our very eyes on Christmas.

In this Season of Advent, let us all await expectantly the joy that God has, is, and will bring to transform the world: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.