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FINDING JOY AGAIN

Sing with me:

*Joy to the world, the LORD is come. Let earth receive its KING.  
Let every heart prepare HIM room,  
And heaven and nature sing, And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and heaven and nature sing.*

Now I suspect you're thinking, "Though the Christmas ads are already out, why would we sing a Christmas carol in the middle of November?"

- The truth is, however, that "Joy to the World," wasn't originally composed for Christmas.
  - Instead, it was part of hymn writer Isaac Watts' attempt to translate and set to new music the Psalms.
    - Watts' inspiration for this hymn was Psalm 98.
  - Moreover, he wrote "Joy to the World" to celebrate, not the first coming of CHRIST, but rather the second.
- That isn't to say that "Joy to the World" can't serve as a wonderful Advent/Christmas hymn.
  - It's just that it fits in with today's readings and might help us to reframe what we hear in these passages and perhaps are experiencing in everyday life.

Because, here's the thing:

- we may be feeling pretty good that the pandemic is ending or coming under some control,
- and it might feel like things will get back to where they were.
  - Certainly, it seems like the time to return to the past is now,
    - but the past is, well, past and the future is before us.

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I've been thinking a lot about grief and loss of control this week in light of where we are because of the pandemic.

- And I think it is important to recognize that, prior to the pandemic, there was some grief in our church over changes that have happened both inside and out over the past decade or longer.
- And I think it is also important to recognize that things have changed and that, though we might wish otherwise,
  - things aren't going to be the same again.
    - We have lost some members, some friends, who won't or can't return.
    - Worship isn't quite what we used to know and love, though it one day may be again.
    - Our programs and facilities use have changed and, reality says need to change.

These are things which bring really grief and a sense of loss,

- which suggests that this may be a good time to remember that wherever we may be on how we feel these days, we come together on Sunday to give thanks for GOD'S love for the world—the whole world:
  - those we agree with and those with whom we disagree about these things, GOD loves us all.
- And we are united not by gender, or ethnicity, or economic status, or political affiliation, but rather by faith:
  - faith that GOD created all things and all people,
  - sustains all things and all people,
  - and will redeem all things and all people,
    - all because of GOD'S overwhelming love for all things and all people.

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Today's gospel passage is apocalyptic—speaking of the end times.

- And while it is popular in religious culture today to think of apocalyptic passages as predictions—if not an outright road map—to the end times, this is not its intent.
  - Though it may feel like all this change and loss for which we grieve, both in the church and the world, is a sign of the end, it is not.
  - Not even the outcome of elections can serve as sign posts to the nearness of CHRIST'S return. That's not the way apocalyptic passages functioned for those who first heard JESUS' words, or who read Luke's gospel.
  - Instead, these kinds of readings and sayings were offered to help believers struggling from oppression and persecution to put their trials into the larger context of the universal struggle between GOD and the forces of evil.
    - In this way, such passages provided comfort, that no matter how difficult things became, GOD would not abandon them and that GOD would prevail,
      - thereby encouraging believers to persevere in the meantime and to witness to their faith in times of persecution and fear.
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As I said a moment ago, I've been thinking a lot about grief and loss of control this week.

- And when we feel like we have lost control, we grieve and we fear.
    - And fear, in turn, can move us toward anger,
    - and anger can steal our joy.
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Frederich Nietzsche, the son and grandson of Lutheran pastors, became a harsh critic of the Christian faith in the nineteenth century.

- Nietzsche once said that he rejected Christianity in part because so few of its followers demonstrated the resurrection joy that it claimed.
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So, how do we find joy again when our lives and our world seem uncertain and tenuous,

- and we fear of a future where we have little or no control?
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First, I think it would be helpful for us to name our grief.

- I think it can be worthwhile to talk with each other about what we miss and our lament about these changes.
    - What and whom did we love from the past, the loss of which we now mourn?
    - What do we fear the future will be like without these things from before?
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Second, I think it might be useful to redirect our fear.

- Instead of thinking about what makes us afraid and only looking inward, take time to think about and talk with others and what their fears may be.
  - Allow such conversations to be times to also name those things that we have gained and which bring us happiness and joy.
    - Where do we see GOD active in the midst of all this change?
  - And then let that become a point of conversation that might bring greater comfort, a sense of being heard, and source for hope.
    - And just in being heard, that they and we might find joy.
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Third, I hope we can redirect the focus of our faith.

- Even though believing in GOD and loving GOD can sometimes go together, they are not the same.
  - The Great Commandment does not say that we should believe in GOD.
    - And I think too often the message of the church has been that our goal is solely to grow in our faith.
- But the Great Commandment tells us that we are to *love* GOD with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.
  - And the way that we love GOD is not just by loving GOD, but also by loving our neighbor and ourselves.

In Genesis, we hear that we are created in GOD'S image.

- There's a lot of theological debate about what that means:
  - that we look like GOD?
  - that we have freedom of choice like GOD?
  - that we have dominion and can create or destroy like GOD?

But the first letter of John tells us who and what GOD is:

- GOD is love.
- Love is the very nature and being and focus of GOD.
  - So, to be created in the image of GOD is to be created to love—to love GOD, to love others, and to love ourselves,
    - because we and everyone else is created in the image of GOD.

Sin is not about the personal imperfection of the self.

- Rather, sin is any act that breaks any of the relationships that GOD declared to be very good at the beginning,
  - and especially our relationships with GOD and with those who are created in the image of GOD.

Therefore, to put ourselves down or to put someone else down is to put down the image of GOD.

- To lie to ourselves or to another human being is to lie to the image of GOD.
- To exploit another human being is to exploit the image of GOD.

So, the antidote to sin is not personal perfection.

- Instead, it is love—the radical, unconditional, incomprehensible, unrestricted, unrestrained love of GOD in whose image we were created.
  - When we love in fulfillment of our faith, we also fulfill who and what we were created to be,
    - and in becoming who and what we were meant to be, we find joy—a joy that we can share with the world.

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We don't live in a world that is hostile to the Christian faith and the message of GOD'S love as in JESUS' time.

- We live in a world that is indifferent to what GOD'S love can mean for the world.
- Where we once had the support of a culture that actively encouraged congregational participation, now that support has withered,
  - but I believe it can be revived.

And this is why I think it is good to sing "Joy to the World":

- so that when we feel that the world is out of control and we panic over a future of more of the same or of something completely different than what we've known,
  - that we can respond to the world in which we live and the people we meet, not with fear or apprehension,
    - but with joy, and wonder, and gratitude,
      - because GOD is active in the world now and in part through us,
      - and there is evidence of GOD'S majesty and goodness all around us.

So, perhaps our response to the exhaustion of 2½ years of pandemic, and either a hopeful or uncertain future, and a host of other things affecting us and afflicting us

- might be to sing words of joy and thanksgiving and praise.
  - For GOD is still at work—both in us and through us for the health of this world that GOD loves so much.
    - And isn't that reason enough to sing?