

Joy to the World
Isaiah 12:1-6
Ernie Thompson

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Third Sunday of Advent

²Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid,
For the Lord God is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation.

³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

⁴And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on God's name; make known God's
deeds among the nations;
proclaim that God's name is exalted.

⁵Sing praises to the Lord, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶Shout
aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

1. What if “Joy to the World” is not just a song we sing at Christmas?

What if this is what Christmas is all about – God's gift of salvation which brings joy to the world?
What if joy to the world is also our mission?
What if that's the reason we are here, to bring the joy of God's salvation to the world?

Our Scripture lesson makes a connection between God's gift of salvation which we celebrate at
Christmas and our response of joy – a joy that we don't keep to ourselves but share with the world.

God saves, and we sing and shout for joy.
That was Israel's experience.
That's what happened at Jesus' birth.
And that can still be our experience today.

God saves, and we sing and shout for joy.
But, I think it's easy for us to miss God's salvation.
Or at least it's easy for me to miss God's salvation.

**→ And so, I want to think this morning about the many ways that God saves and the joy that
salvation always brings.**

2. In his book Generous Orthodoxy, Brian McLaren has a chapter called “The Seven Jesuses I Have Known.”

Now, McLaren makes clear that these are not seven different Jesuses. But there are many different ways of understanding who Jesus is and why Jesus has come. And so, there are many different ways of understanding salvation. And there is something important, something deeply true in each of them.

McLaren starts with the Jesus he met as a child in Sunday School.

McLaren says he can still remember the picture of Jesus hanging on the wall in his Sunday School class.

It was Jesus welcoming the children, and in this particular picture the children were as the song says, *“red and yellow, black and white.”*

Now, McLaren says he knows that this picture is not historically accurate, and yet, he says, and it is profoundly true. Jesus really does love all the children of the world – *“red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.”*

Jesus loves the little children and he loves the rest of us to.

That is the first and the most basic way to understand salvation. And once we understand that God loves us, that God is on our side, that changes our lives. We’re able to as our lesson says, *“trust in God and not be afraid.”* We find a strength that is not our own.

That’s one kind of salvation, trusting in God’s love. And God’s love is certainly a reason for joy – a joy that is worth celebrating and sharing.

In High School McLaren started to ask questions, as many of us do. And the Sunday School Jesus didn’t have answers to those questions.

You see pictures like the ones we’ve seen this week, a little girl from Yemen on the brink of starvation, and it doesn’t seem like every child is precious in God’s sight.

McLaren says he began to wonder how this Sunday School Jesus fit in the world of suffering and pain and brokenness.

But then, as he was wrestling with these questions, he was introduced to another Jesus, the conservative Protestant Jesus.

This Jesus takes the suffering and pain and brokenness of the world very seriously.

This Jesus talks about sin and evil and the terrible consequences that they have for us and for the world.

Salvation here is not just love, but sacrificial love, a love that brings repentance and forgiveness and healing and reconciliation, putting back together what had been torn apart.

If God loves us enough to send his only son to suffer with us and for us, even to the point of death on a cross, that self-giving, sacrificial love is certainly something to celebrate and something to share.

But still, McLaren had questions. He says,

Jesus' cross in the past saved me from hell in the future, but it was hard to be clear on what that meant for me in the present.

And more importantly, he wondered, did the gospel have anything to say about justice for the many, not just the justification of the individual.

Then McLaren met another Jesus, the Pentecostal Jesus.

The emphasis in the Pentecostal church was not on Jesus' death or on our future in heaven, but rather on receiving the gift of the Spirit here and now.

McLaren says there is an important truth here. Jesus saves by sending his Spirit to work in us and through us. And when the Spirit comes, there is always joy.

Then McLaren met another Jesus, the Roman Catholic Jesus.

McLaren was working on a Master's Degree in English, and was reading Roman Catholic writers like Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor.

Those writers led him to other Catholic writers like Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen.

In these Catholic writers, McLaren says, the emphasis was on the resurrection.

Now, this is not just a Catholic view.

One of the earliest ways that Christians described salvation is known as "*Christus Victor*" – Christ the victor.

In this understanding Jesus saves by defeating the powers of sin and evil and death. And then, Jesus' resurrection sets loose a resurrection power in the world to bring new life even where there is death. And that is certainly a reason for joy.

We lived in Baton Rouge for a while when I was growing up. And so, when my mother passed away a few years ago, my father wanted to end the service New Orleans style – with an upbeat version of "*Oh When the Saints Go Marching In.*"

Dad ordered a bunch of rainbow colored umbrellas and passed them out before the service. After the benediction, the band played "Oh When the Saints" and Dad led a parade marching around the sanctuary.

God saves by raising Jesus from the dead, and by raising us from the death to new life, and that is a profound reason for our joy.

After meeting the Roman Catholic Jesus, McLaren read a book on prayer, and discovered yet another Jesus, the Eastern Orthodox Jesus.

McLaren was fascinated by the Eastern Orthodox picture of the Trinity. This tradition describes the Trinity as a kind of circle dance. It's an image of a dynamic and relational God. God's act of creation is a way of expanding this eternal dance of joy. And sin means stepping out of the dance.

God saves by entering into creation in the birth of Jesus Christ and through Jesus God invites us back into the circle and restores the rhythm and beauty of the dance.

McLaren says,

*If the Evangelical Jesus saves by dying,
the Pentecostal Jesus by sending his Spirit,
the Catholic Jesus by rising from the dead,
the Eastern Orthodox Jesus saves simply by being born, by showing up, by coming among us.*

That's why we celebrate and sing for joy at Christmas – because we recognize that in the birth of this child, God comes to save.

McLaren describes three other Jesuses he met along the way, and three more ways of seeing God's salvation.

There is the Liberal Protestant Jesus, who McLaren met when he married an Episcopalian. Salvation for liberal Protestants is about more than just forgiveness and going to heaven. It's also about the Kingdom of God and working so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. God saves us by calling us to follow Christ. And as we join Jesus in the work of God's kingdom, it gives our lives purpose and joy and we become a blessing to the world.

There is also the Anabaptist Jesus McLaren met in what have been called "peace churches" churches like the Mennonites and the Amish and the Quakers.

This Jesus calls the church to be different from the world and to work for peace through non-violent resistance.

Jesus saves by showing us a different way to live, a path that leads to peace. And in these communities and on this path there is deep joy.

And finally, there is the Jesus of Liberation Theology.

This Jesus comes to preach good news to the poor to release those held captive. Those who are poor or oppressed often see this Jesus more clearly than the rest of us.

Jesus saves by speaking the truth to power and setting things right in the world. And when salvation comes, people sing and shout for joy.

→ There are many ways to understand salvation, and I think there is something important and true in each one of them. One common thread though, is that God's salvation always brings joy, not just for us, but also for the world.

3. Our Scripture lesson on this third Sunday of Advent, invites us to look for the many ways God saves, to look for God's salvation that is all around us.

We can look for the places where God allows us to "*trust and not be afraid.*" That is one way salvation comes, and it is a reason for joy.

We can look for the times when God becomes "*our strength and our might.*" That is another way salvation comes, and it is a reason for our joy.

We can look for the places where there is forgiveness and healing and justice and love. Those are all ways that salvation comes, and they are all reasons for our joy.

And once we see God's salvation, once we experience God's salvation, we don't keep this salvation to ourselves.

God calls us to sing and shout and share the good news of forgiveness and healing and new life.

We experience God's salvation and then we seek to share that salvation by embodying God's love for others and we work for peace and justice and reconciliation.

→ "Joy to the World" is not just a song we sing. Joy to the world is our mission. And so we to sing and shout and celebrate and share God's gift of joy with the world.