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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Prophets of Joy

Philippians 4:4-7: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In today's sermon, Beloved, you are going to be my Greek Chorus. I'm serious. Let's take a second to learn your lines, ok? There's the old Sunday School song - I bet you know it - it was written in the 1920s by George William Cooke, a Methodist pastor and revivalist. It goes (and you can join in if you know it),

*I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where?
Down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart!
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where?
Down in my heart to stay!*

Great. That's your part in the sermon. Today, you are the prophets of joy.

Okay. So. Today is, at least traditionally, the Sunday of Advent reserved for joy. Long ago, Advent was called St. Martin's Lent, because it began on St. Martin's Day—that's St. Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier who converted to Christianity in France, who once tore his cloak in half during a snowstorm to save a beggar from the cold. That night, he dreamed that Jesus spoke to him, wearing the half-cloak, and Jesus said, "Here is Martin, the Roman soldier who is now baptized; he has clothed me." St. Martin died on November 8, and that day once marked the 40 day fast that lead to Christmas. Midway through the season, the church took a little break from the fast, and this Sunday was called Gaudete Sunday—*gaudete* is Latin for joy. Some churches mark this day with a pink candle. Truly, Church never really settled on themes for these Sundays in Advent, but, even now, on this Third Sunday in Advent, we reserve time for joy.

Okay, your turn:

*I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where?
Down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart!
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where?
Down in my heart to stay!*

Of course, in our times, a Sunday focused on joy provides a counterpoint on the manic joviality our society requires in December. I'm not trying to engage in a happiness versus

joy debate as much as wanting to bring attention to the fact that our society's year-end celebrations often require us to manufacture a happiness that denies the reality of the suffering we all experience. When, amid the Elf on the Shelf, and the dozens of Christmas shows, and the rush to get the feast on the table, is there time to name the pain of this world? To name that 167,000 children will spend this Christmas without a parent or primary giver, because that parent or grandparent or uncle who loved them died of COVID? When is the time name declining mental health among young people, another global pandemic? When is the time to name the plight of displaced persons all over the world, or people experiencing homelessness, who may not have a home in which to celebrate the holidays?

It's your turn again:

*I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where?
Down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart!
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where?
Down in my heart to stay!*

It isn't easy to sing, but joy is our message. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, telling them to "Rejoice in the Lord always," this was no Pollyanna message. He writes to Philippi from a Roman jail. He writes to a congregation that has lost faith in him. They worry about what it means to have a leader in prison. They worry that this may be the beginning of the persecution for all of them. And Paul tells them to rejoice, not because he wants them to manufacture happiness, to grin and bear it. Rather, the heart of the joy Paul professes is rooted in the love of God. The mystic and pastor Henri Nouwen put it this way, joy is "the experience of knowing you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take that love away." Rejoice in the Lord always.

Being joyful is not a divine request to deny the existence of hate, evil, and suffering in the world. Rather, the heart of joy is a conviction that this is not the way God intends for the world to be. The heart of joy is the confidence that God is working to change the world. The heart of joy is the lightness that comes in accepting the call to be a part of God's work in the world, the call to be prophets of joy: to tell the world of a God who comes to speak directly and honestly about sadness, darkness, fear, conflict and to lead us in joy and hope and peace and love.

After all, God did not bring hate into the world to conquer hate, but sent the Prince of Peace. God did not bring darkness to light a moonless night, but comes as the bright Morning star. God does not use war to end war, but hammers swords into plowshares. God does not leave us alone to suffer, but comes as the Great Physician. God does not work in fear to finish off fear, but comes as the Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God.

And we, Beloved, are called as prophets, proclaimers of this Good News, heralds of joy. That every act of kindness, every word of mercy and forgiveness, every covenant of peace

comes from God who is joy and peace and hope and love. Let us proclaim this to one another once again:

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where?

Down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart!

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where?

Down in my heart to stay!

Amen.