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## A Great Joy

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 12-24-20  
Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1-14, Isaiah 9:1-7*

In the name of the God of joy and of endless peace, Amen.

Merry Christmas!

Now, I want to let you in on a little secret. This service is pre-recorded. That means that today, the day I'm actually saying "Merry Christmas" to you, is not yet Christmas. It's almost a week before. And today, the day I'm recording this, I have to say that this year, in 2020, I might be tempted to have a little bit of trepidation recording this so early. 2020 is the year that just keeps on giving. What if some other crisis happens between today and Christmas Day, something it would be tone-deaf for me not to at least mention in my sermon? Some of you understand this kind of thinking. Some people get worried exactly when things start going well, for fear the shoe will drop. I once heard someone say, "relaxing makes me nervous." In spite of 2020, exactly in 2020, today December 17 and the day you hear this Christmas Eve, I am giving you exactly the same message, no matter what has happened or will happen:

This day is about great joy for all the people. This day is about joy.

Regardless of who you are, where you are, and how you are, I want to say that in Christ, we are connected across time and space. Whether you are alone as you have been for months, or with the same three people who have been driving you crazy for months, or with extended family or friends, this minute, we are together. And in this minute, let's remember the words of the angels, that this day is about a great joy for all the people.

Why can we say that it is about joy, really, even despite whatever has happened in this world this year big picture, and whatever has happened in your life this world?

You all know the story. Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem, Joseph's hometown, because the Emperor wanted everyone to be counted in a census. It was all about getting the Roman Empire as much tax as possible, per capital, regardless of citizenship or presumably whether you had a job or anything else. And so Joseph and Mary, who we know were poor, head to Bethlehem even though unmarried teenager Mary is pregnant. Turns out she goes into labor while they are still looking for a hotel, and some innkeeper lets them use the barn for her to give birth. Now if she had been a Roman citizen would they have let her at least use some place clean away from the animals? We'll probably never know. What we do know is that Mary delivered her first child, when she herself was hardly more than a child, apparently without the help of

other women, with only Joseph there to make sure the cows didn't trample on her as she delivered her baby. And when the baby was born, she wrapped him in a blanket and had to put the baby in the animal's feeding bin because she didn't want to put him where she was, which was on the ground.

And this is cause for joy. It's about joy because this baby, our tradition tells us, is God taking human form for the simple reason that God wants to be as close to us as possible. God doesn't choose a middle class or upper class family to join. God especially picks the people who no one thinks are important to join. God becomes one of them.

And that means that it is always precisely where we are least successful, most alone, least privileged, most despised by others, that God has already said, for all time, I am with you. And not only that, but this powerless baby Jesus is called a Savior. The Greek word for Savior is the same word that means Healer. Jesus the baby can't do anything. But the fact of Jesus, the existence of Jesus, is healing. In the reading from the prophet Isaiah for today, the prophet describes a people who have been walking in darkness but who see a great light. They see and experience a God who brings what the prophet calls "an endless peace." That word peace also means wholeness. This God brings an endless wholeness, a fulfillment and a joy that cannot ever run out.

Well let's get nitty gritty and real. We all know that life has plenty of ups and downs. Joy seems to be something that rises

and falls with one's circumstances, with getting your basic needs met at the least, with the quality of our connection with others, with being honored and being granted the dignity that is every human being's due. But no, something about this baby being born, something about the vision of the prophet is saying this joy is endless, this wholeness is endless, it is unconditional. How can that be?

Some of you know this book, called the "Book of Joy" which is an interview of two spiritual giants in our time – the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Both have experienced tremendous suffering, and both also share how it is that they are people with joy. Both speak about a joy that transcends one's circumstances. Both speak about a joy that comes as a side effect of something else, which is the willingness to devote one's life to caring for the wellbeing of others. The Dalai Lama says that the ultimate source of happiness is within us. Archbishop Tutu says that God wants us to flourish, to be filled with joy and excitement, and to share God's love and laughter and joy and compassion with others, which will grant you the thing you weren't seeking, which is your own joy, your own fulfillment.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that joy can't be sought directly, as an end in itself, but is a byproduct of becoming loved and whole enough to truly make a cosmic mind-blowing paradigm shift, which is to delight in others and seek to serve them. Not in a way that is

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<sup>1</sup> See the Dalai Lama & Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (Avery, 2016) at 14, 298.

codependent. Not as a sideways way of those in power seeking to maintain control over those who are oppressed. But genuinely, because the overwhelming love of God flows through you like a river flows through a canyon. What happens is joy.

Now, you may be thinking, look, I can't even get myself to get up early enough to pray or meditate on a regular basis, let alone reach the spiritual attainment of the Dalai Lama or Desmond Tutu. But perhaps this is why this particular holiday is so focused on children. Jesus being born as a baby. Gifts being given for the joy of little ones. If you think about it, little children are innately joyful. They love to play. For a baby a toilet paper roll is the most mesmerizing source of joy and play. Joy is the innate birthright and condition of being human.

But we do need to make one other move. Little children don't inherently live their lives for the wholeness and joy of others. For that, we need spiritual growing up. We need to receive the love of God, the God who seeks to be with us in our weakness, in our emptiness, in our aloneness, in the areas we most struggle, in order to become conduits of this love. Archbishop Tutu says that "we are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy... as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters, we have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. at 11-12.

Today, let the birth of Christ remind you that exactly as you are, exactly as this world is, God seeks to meet us there and catch us up into God's embrace. Imagine the face of God looking directly at you and smiling with delight, without a trace of judgment or pity or disapproval. Now take that shining face and seek to see others with the eyes of God. Seek to forget yourself long enough to enter into another person's world deeply. May you experience the unconditional joy of God, the endless wholeness of Christ. Make delight and fun and humor your spiritual practice. Let your unconditional joy be how you choose to be countercultural, how you choose to follow Jesus. Merry Christmas.