

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 14, 2025

Those are all the announcements for the good of the order this day. So, I'm going to invite you to get comfy in your pews and to take a deep breath in with me.

Breathe it out slowly. Take another deep breath in, and breathe it out slowly.

And breathe in God's mercies,

and breathe out God's mercies to others,

and breathe in God's mercies,

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious and Loving Spirit, you are as close as our very next breath. And so we pray that in this time you might dwell in your peacefulness within us and around us. That by your power you might quiet any voice within us but your own that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, friends, two scripture lessons for us this day. The first comes to us from the prophet Jeremiah, the second from the Gospel according to Luke. For those who have not been with us, then you might not be aware that we are moving through an Advent sermon series entitled *Insisting on Hope*. *Insisting on Hope*. And we have spent the last couple weeks wrestling with what that looks like in the midst of a world that is difficult to navigate and in the midst of personal lives that have all sorts of challenges. If you haven't heard the first couple of sermons, you can go back and you can catch up on our podcast or on YouTube. You can see the ways in which these threads of insistence will make their way through each message. We've, each week, framed first our fear and then our wilderness. We've framed each of these ideas both personally and communally. And we're going to do that again this morning. So maybe listen with that sort of ear, the personal and communal ear to the scripture that is read this day. First from the prophet Jeremiah, the first chapter, verses 4-10.

This is Jeremiah speaking.

The word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Alas, sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak. I am too young." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, I am too young. You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do

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not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

Here ends the reading.

And continuing in our second lesson from the Gospel according to Luke, the first chapter, verses 26-39.

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. And he will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be holy. He will be called the Son of God. And now your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son. And this is the sixth month for her, who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And then Mary said, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. At that time, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, with each week, we've wrestled with this personal and communal nature and framing first of our fear and then of our wilderness. This morning, we're going to frame God's joy, God's joy as both personal and communal. I want us simply on this third Sunday of Advent just to notice a few parts of the text. This will not be with both of these texts being rather lengthy and probably some familiar to some of you. We're only going to notice a handful of things this morning together. Just...just three. And then I'm going to invite you to notice even more as you go throughout the week this week with each of these texts. I invite you to hold the first chapter of Jeremiah and part of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke as your spiritual practice

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this week, okay? Notice the ways in which God is working. We'll notice a few things this morning.

Let's frame God's joy first personally. The personal dimension of uh God's joy is that it interrupts the ordinary, the ordinariness of life. Okay. In each of these instances for Jeremiah and for Mary, the joy of God breaks into their very ordinary lives. They are not expecting God to show up either as the voice of God or as an angel. That is not the plan. Okay? They are faithful people certainly, but neither of them expects that God is going to show up and interrupt their lives. Jeremiah is not looking for a prophetic career. He's good, right? He's got things set up in the ways in which he wants to. Mary is not seeking a divine assignment, especially not like this one. But God interrupts their real lives. Young, unsure, ordinary people. And what I love about this text, I want us to notice not simply the interruption, but their response to God's interruption. It is exceedingly honest, which I think if we are to be anything in Advent, maybe it is to be honest. Jeremiah says, "I don't know how to speak," when God tells him he's going to be a prophet. Mary says, "How can this be? I'm a virgin," when she is told that she will be pregnant. Both of them are confused about this interruption of God in their everyday lives. They're confused and they're afraid.

The subtitle of our sermon series, *Insisting on Hope*, asks us a question. What...what do you fear? Right. And Mary and Jeremiah, they are fearful for different reasons. Mary—rightly afraid of disgrace. Afraid...afraid of the way in which this interruption of the divine is going to ruin her life, her relationship that she has, right? How she's going to explain it to someone, to Joseph specifically. Right? Jeremiah—afraid for a different reason. Afraid because he's not good with words. He's young, hasn't practiced public speaking very much. "I'm no good at it," he says. But this interruption, this joy that interrupts their lives, it doesn't deny their fear. It simply invites them and invites their fear to be met by God's promise. God does not shame their honest responses, their hesitations, but God meets them in both of them. To Mary, he tells through Gabriel not to fear, that she indeed is blessed. To Jeremiah, he takes his hand and touches Jeremiah's lips, meeting them in their fear, not denying it, simply drawing closer to them in the midst of it. That's what God's joy does to us. It...it interrupts our ordinary lives, and it meets us wherever we are.

God's joy, I want us to notice further, begins before circumstances change. This is key for us and especially if you're going to try to practice joy in this Advent season. Before circumstances change, God's joy meets us in it. Joy does not come after success or clarity or safety for Jeremiah or for Mary. Jeremiah hears God's call before he is capable of actually being a prophet. He says,

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"I am only a boy." Mary receives the angel's greeting before anything is resolved. So that she has to sit with fear and scandal and uncertainty. All of those still remain for her.

The joy that breaks into their lives that will result in Jeremiah prophesying and Mary singing is not happiness or optimism. It is a deep assurance that God is already at work in their lives. That means that for them insisting on hope means trusting God's presence before they know the outcome. And I think this is a really important lesson for each of us as well because we find ourselves in the season of waiting, and we're in it, right? And we know that only a couple of weeks from now we will celebrate the incarnation of our God. And yet when we find ourselves in the season of waiting in our personal lives, we don't actually know what the end is going to look like. We haven't had it all resolved for us. When we get that diagnosis, when we get that bad news, when that relationship is strained, right, when something's going on at work, we don't have resolution for it. And so Advent joy, the joy that we learn from Mary and from Jeremiah, it makes its appearance before any circumstances have changed for us. I was sitting with a church member a couple of years ago who had just received a difficult diagnosis from their oncologist. Okay? And it's a holy thing when pastors get invited into those spaces, right? And I was in the midst of a pastoral meeting with them, and they said something that was really important for me that stuck with me even to this day. I was asking how they were doing, navigating it. And they said, "I don't feel happy, but I do feel held. I feel held by my God." Right? They didn't know what the treatments were, what they would result in, right? But they trusted even before that God was present with them in the midst of it. The joy of Advent breaks in way before anything changes, any circumstances change. I think that might be an important message for somebody this morning here. Right? If you find yourself in a place with lots of uncertainty, lots of circumstances that feel overwhelming, if you look out in the world, and you see a place of difficulty and hurt and pain and fear and you wonder how it is we can even light a candle for joy in the midst of a season like this one. The joy that we learn about in Advent is one that doesn't ignore the circumstances but does trust that God meets us in them. Right? That's the Advent joy. Not naive but faithful.

The final thing I want us to notice this morning is that the interruption of God in our lives is never just about us. This is the communal piece. So we start with a personal piece of interrupting our ordinary lives, and then we go to that interruption is never just about you. It's never just about you. Jeremiah is appointed over kingdoms and nations as a prophet. Right? Mary, although this interruption of joy is very personal to her...we know the story. We know that Christ has come for all people. And so her, what seemingly is a personal interruption, is actually an interruption for the entire world, a gift. I think about that this morning because some of you got up this morning, and it was really easy to get here, right? This season brings you deep and

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abiding joy. Lighting this candle makes perfect sense to you, right? You're the ones that you decorated everything Thanksgiving afternoon, right? Your tree was up early. Lights on your house were ready to go, right? You had your drop in or your Christmas party cards out real quick, right? Because this season for you is filled with joy, and it comes easy.

If that's the case, if that's how you found yourself this morning, I want to invite you to believe that that gift of joy is not meant just for you in this season. That you're sitting beside somebody in the pew or close to you in the pew, I should say, that is in need of a measure of the joy that you walked into this place with. They opened the weather app this morning and saw 20° feels like 5 like I did at 5:00 a.m. this morning and said 'no church. No. No.' And that's not a knock on y'all watching online. Okay.

But they got here anyway. Maybe by sheer will and determination to sit in the pew, right? And they came here because they needed a measure of joy that just isn't welling up in this season, right? It's just not coming easy. And so if you walked into this place with an extra measure, I hope you'll leave without it. I hope you'll give it to somebody this morning before you leave. Right? And if you walked in here, and you are in desperate need of believing that joy is still possible in your life and in the world, I hope you'll linger a bit today, right? You'll cozy up to somebody you haven't met before, maybe with a cookie or a little bit of lemonade or coffee. Coffee actually. Yeah, do that.

The joy that Advent teaches us about is for us, but it's never just for us. It's meant to be shared. It's communal in nature. There's this beautiful thing about what it looks like for us to be people who insist on hope. This beautiful thing that God is doing in our midst in this Advent season. My hope is that part of the beautiful thing that happens for you in these few weeks is that God interrupts your ordinary life, maybe even interrupts some of your plans, with a joy that surprises you, maybe even makes you feel like you're not equipped in some way, right? You don't speak very well or you're too young. I hope that God interrupts your life with a moment of joy. Maybe in this worship service or maybe when you're at work or maybe on your ride home, right? When that happens, I hope you trust and believe that that joy can be real and experienced even when you're still in the midst of the wilderness time, when the circumstances haven't been figured out yet, right? That you will allow yourself to sit in the joy of that moment, but that you won't sit there forever. That you might feel the call, the invitation to share a bit, an extra measure of that joy with someone who needs it. What I imagine is that in God's great plan, there is a community of people who are bent on insisting on not only hope but joy. And that each of them has the ability to carry that out into a world that desperately needs it, right? that desperately needs to be able to look upon the world and say, "There can be joy found in this place and in my neighbor."

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Right? If you came in empty this morning, I pray you leave full. If you came in full, I hope you spend all the joy you got on somebody close by.

Let's pray.

Gracious and loving one, you interrupt our lives and we are so grateful. You interrupt us with a joy that doesn't make a whole lot of sense to us because nothing's resolved yet. We're still in the midst of our wilderness season, and yet for some reason a smile can break forth. Our heart can be warmed by the word or the touch of a neighbor. What we pray for, Lord, is that you would equip us to indeed be your people in this season of Advent, that you would fill us with a measure of your Advent joy that's not naive but is deeply faithful that we might carry it forth and proclaim it. If we need the right words to speak, we pray that you would touch our lips. And if we need our spirit to believe, we pray that you would give us the words of Mary that we might let it be with us according to your will. Amen.