

December 1, 2019 Joyful Hope Advent 1

I want to share with you a short story I discovered on the internet, there's also a video to go with it, but I'm going to ask Allison to help me illustrate it.

"My mama told me something when I was growing up that has for ever changed my life. She played the piano at our little church at third and pine street for thirty-seven years. She tried to teach me to play the piano, but I wasn't very good. She would teach me the names of the notes, what a major key is, what a minor key is. She tried to teach me musical theory but I was just bored.

"Then one day she told me that the best news in the world is found by playing a simple scale on the piano. I had no idea what she meant. So, she told me, "Play an eighth note scale." So, I did. (Playing notes going up the scale C D E F G A B C sounds like "do re me fa sol la ti do"). I said, "How is that good news?" She said I played it incorrectly and that I needed to play it the other way. So, I did. (Playing notes going down the scale "do ti la sol fa mi re do.") Again, I said, "How is that good news?" She said that I played it the right way, but I needed to add the pauses. "The pauses?" "The pauses. Add them on the first, second, fourth, sixth, seventh and last note." Now I was frustrated and said, "How can eighth notes with random pauses be the best news in the world?" Then I got up, walked

away and went outside. Frankly I didn't care what she was talking about. I didn't like playing the piano anyway.

“Well, years later my mama got sick and passed away. As I was thinking about her, I remembered what she told me about the piano. Not only that, I still remembered the notes she told me to pause on: the first, second, fourth, sixth, seventh and last note. So, I sat down at her piano and played the scale with the pauses. (With pauses plays the song **“Joy to the World, the Lord is come.”**) And that's when I realized the good news she was talking about.”

I love the hymn “Joy to the World”. This carol however was not written for Christmas at all. It is Isaac Watts interpretation of Psalm 98 and refers to Christ's second coming. Longing for God's presence in this broken world. Longing for God's Joy to cause heaven and earth to sing so that no longer sin and sorrow reign. Watts was a rebel in his day; he was a pastor and a song writer before his time. He sought to break the church out of its somber, solemn box and bring Joy and hope and even maybe some emotion into the religious rituals of the day. Following in his father's footsteps he was a dissenter of the Church of England; his father was even thrown in jail for his rebellion.

That is probably what I love about Isaac the most. His music pushed the boundaries by going into scriptures outside of the psalms and using the musicality of bar tunes. But most of all he longed to see the light of Christ shine in the darkest hardest places of the world.

I'm not too proud to stand here and share some of my vulnerabilities with you. I battle with chronic depression and anxiety and have the help and support of a great psychologist to journey through the struggles. She has helped me enhance my ministry and my calling in life. The first thing I learned from her, a year and a half ago was to "loosen up" and by doing so, joy goes up. So, I hoped and hoped, and tried with great tenacity (her words, not mine!) to allow joy to come back to my life. The thing is though, that you can hope all you want, but you have to surrender your fears, your struggles, your doubts to God and allow yourself to trust and truly hope that your faith connection with God will allow joy to burst forth in every corner of your life – you just have to surrender, trust, and be vulnerable and open. Tall order isn't it? I'm still struggling to do that 18months later, but I think I might be turning a corner, who knows.

This Sunday is about hope. I hope that I can have ongoing discussions with God about "What do I need to know?" "What would you like me to do?" and

“Where do you want me to be?” When we truly still our hearts and minds to listen to God’s answers, we can be led to peace, joy and then love – of self, others, the world. But it requires a partnership with God. Remember, we can’t survive the journey to Bethlehem on our own, in a vacuum, we need to be in dialogue with each other and with God. And by allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, we can lean on one another and really hope for that Christmas joy, that can carry us all year long.

Nobel Peace Prize Laureates His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have survived more than fifty years of exile and the soul-crushing violence of oppression. Despite their hardships – or, as they would say, because of them – they are two of the most joyful people on the planet.

In April 2015, Archbishop Tutu traveled to the Dalai Lama’s home in Dharamsala, India, to celebrate His Holiness’s eightieth birthday and to create what they hope would be a gift for other. They looked back on their long lives to answer a single burning question: How do we find joy in the face of life’s inevitable suffering?

They traded intimate stories, teased each other continually, and shared their spiritual practices. By the end of a week filled with laughter and punctuated with tears, these two global heroes had stared into the abyss of despair of our time and revealed how to live a life brimming with joy. They wrote a book entitled: “The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World” which offers us a rare opportunity to experience their astonishing and unprecedented week together from the first embrace to the final good-bye.

Advent hope is not a yearly exercise of playing pretend. Instead, Advent hope is fully aware of what was, what is, and what is yet to come. Against all evidence to the contrary, Christians hope. This Advent question in Isaiah about “the days to come” strikes close to the heart of followers of Jesus. It is that restless spirit that can be answered only by our hope in God. It is a longing that can be soothed only by the comfort of our future in God. The Advent plea comes with a desire for God to teach us again of God’s ways. That once again God would lead us in God’s path.

When the nations totter, hatred is on the rise, and hope and peace seem obscure, days can be uncomfortably frightening and overwhelmingly dark for people of all ages. Such a vivid darkness also comes in broken relationships, in

financial struggles, in conversations with doctors about a diagnosis, in carrying for a dying parent. There are other kinds of darkness in life, and it is so dark at times that it can feel as if you cannot see your hand in front of your face. A mother whose young adult child faces a heartbreak. A person who is rapidly losing independence due to dementia must look into a darkness of helplessness that is beyond description. Any sixth-grader who is convinced that absolutely everyone in their class hates them can so easily slip into the shadow of despair. In every congregation on an Advent Sunday, there is darkness haunting the lives of at least some who gather.

Advent just will not quit. It keeps coming and coming. That is not a bad thing. It can be part of the Advent proclamation. It is as if God's promise spoken through the word of the prophet has a life of its own. In every season of a person's life, the Advent message can break through, but the Advent promise is bigger than that. In a culture that is so strikingly antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the light of God's grace still offers a flicker of hope that can guide the way. Together, the people of God will still be walking. As we enter into the season of Advent, I am fully aware that even for some of you here today, Joy is not the first emotion you are waking up with in the morning. You're not living a life of

constant happiness (even if that is what you portray to the outside world). Those who know themselves to be the body of Christ will be walking in the light of hope, taking their cues from Isaiah and other prophets and telling the world of the comfort of God's grace: there is joyful hope. You can find it. You can trust it. And you must surrender to it. Amen.