

“Ineffable Joy In Advent”

Third Sunday of Advent

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Dec. 12, 2021

Scriptures

Isaiah 12:2-6

Luke 1:46-56

Songs/Hymns

"What Child Is This" 281

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MEDITATION

INTRO – our Bible readings are being read, heard and meditated upon this morning in the wake of one of the top 15 worst tornadic destruction events in the history of America this past Friday night. As you know, a very destructive series of tornadoes carved an approximately 250-mile path through northeast Arkansas, southeast Missouri, northwest Tennessee and western Kentucky. Over 80 people have died within a destruction level that rivals the destruction power made by warfare during WWII. And so, in honor of the more than 80 people who lost their natural lives last Friday night, as we pray for their families who are engulfed in grief, and in gratitude and prayer for the many first responders in those communities, let me share this meditation with you.

I invite you to close your eyes and take several deep breaths. Let your mind go to where you feel healing and prayer support are very needed right now in the wake of the tornadic . Now envision God’s divinely loving Presence coming down over these areas of devastation, where sobbing and mourning have taken hold: let yourself envision the golden-bright Light from God gently pouring down upon those places south of us, which were ripped and shredded by the category EF4 - EF5 tornados that landed first near Mayfield, Kentucky less than 48 hrs ago. Picture the golden-white Light from Heaven enveloping those regions; envision the Lord’s holy angels (the people of Heaven) surrounding those swallowed up by loss and grief, angels who join with us now in prayer and meditation. Pray now in your own way for the victims, their families, our heroic first responders and medical providers—pray for their Federal and state government leaders, and for all working hard to take care of those whose lives have been rocked by massive destruction.

In a moment I will read aloud our Bible readings, and you are welcome to listen with eyes closed or open. Let us remember that before God was born among us on

Christmas morn, all the world lay in deep darkness as people struggled to know what God was really like as a Divinely loving and wise Being. Advent and Christmas remind us that no matter how dark, cold and lost our world may get, the Lord promises always to come...to advent...to intercede in some way...to respond to our needs for a Savior and Redeemer:

Isaiah 12:2-6

"Behold, God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,
and He has become my salvation."

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

⁴ And you will say in that day:

"Give thanks to the LORD,

call upon His name,
make known His deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that His name is exalted.

⁵ "Sing praises to the LORD, for He has done gloriously;
let this be made known in all the earth.

⁶ Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for He who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is His name.

⁵⁰ And His mercy is for those who fear Him,
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with His arm;

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

⁵² He has brought down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of humble estate;

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich He has sent away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped His servant Israel,
in remembrance of His mercy,

⁵⁵ as He spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to His offspring forever.”

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Insight for Worship

Secrets of Heaven 4459 by Emanuel Swedenborg

"In heaven people who know, acknowledge, and believe from the heart that they have no power from themselves, but that all the power they have is from the Lord, are said to be the least. And yet they are the greatest, because they have power from the Lord."

SERMON: “Ineffable Joy In Advent”

So, here we are my friends. We’re now in the middle of our Advent journey together. We are a small band of caring and faithful Christian people, who are very similar really to the original twelve disciples who followed our Lord long ago. Within all of us, I believe, are very similar strengths and weaknesses revealed within that small, ragtag group of misfits—a group of very poor peasant Jewish people, who decided that God’s incredibly healing, inspiring, universal Love for all human beings was worth risking their lives for, as they followed their Messiah.

There are some very beautiful and special things I can share with you this morning, about how spiritual joy plays a powerful role within Advent and within our ongoing spiritual lives and the growth the Lord has in store for us as His children. First let me say that I am talking about a depth of joy that is so awesome and glorious that in reality our natural words are not able to fully describe and give justice to what spiritual joy really is. We can try to describe it and understand it, but in total truth my friends, at its heart spiritual joy is...**ineffable**. Our words are not enough to express how vast and deep the joys of the Lord and His advent at Christmastime are. Thus, just like our other themes in Advent, which are HOPE, PEACE and LOVE, these graces and gifts given by our Lord are the most powerful forces in existence! Even the devastation and horrible loss of life by tornados, or by long-lasting warfare, and by other very destructive events, still...like a Phoenix Bird rising up out of the ashes of destruction...the Lord’s Spirit of eternal life, love and giving will be born among and within us anew. It is true.

This, you see, is where the life and times of the Lord’s chosen people, the ancient Israelites, were at during the ministry years of the Prophet Isaiah. The land of Judah (or

Southern Kingdom) had been attacked by the Assyrian Army around 710 BCE, and both sides claimed victory. This left Israel's Southern Kingdom open to conquest by the Babylonians years later. The armies of Babylon subjugated Judah and carried off Israel's most affluent and intelligent people, in order to re-educate them to become loyal Babylonians. Thousands were carried off into exile and those people were forced to abandon their ancient Hebrew faith—except for Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. One could say that the Hebrews' lives and way of life were nearly destroyed. This was the historical setting of when the Prophet Isaiah was called into service for the Lord. And so, even in those terribly dark and loathsome times, the Lord came to His people and gave them words of comfort, words of faith and encouragement.

And God spake unto them saying:

"Behold, God is my salvation;
 I will trust, and will not be afraid;
 for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,
 and He has become my salvation."
³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

This reminds us that in times of darkness or in times of peace, God remains with us—dwelling in our souls and shining His Spirit of Divine Love-and-Wisdom into our hearts, minds and lives. The Lord makes certain that the "wells of salvation," the truth and wisdom of His Word and the will and desire to do good and put God's immense Love into action and service in life will never be destroyed. They are divinely given, and because they are eternal they inspire the powerful spiritual force we call: **JOY**. Spiritual joy and its unquenchable exuberance play a lively role in our biblical story of Advent and Christmas. We find it in the breathtaking scene when Mary first visits her much older cousin, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist in-utero. God's Word tells us that when Mary's voice first touched the eardrums of Elizabeth, the baby inside of her womb "leapt for joy"! Then Elizabeth, feeling inspired by the Lord's Spirit exclaimed words of joy: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Luke 1:42-45)

Immediately after Elizabeth's powerful words were uttered, Mary then bursts forth in what has become known as "the Magnificat."

When you think of deep-spiritual joy or of joyful times in your life, what memories or stories come into your mind? Our New Church theology teaches: deep, spiritual and lasting joy has its source in God. It may involve a long or even a series of very difficult and challenging circumstances, which culminate in us being surprised by joy at times. God's infinite ability to regenerate us through painful and difficult experiences can give birth to joy inside—**AND THESE POWERFUL MOMENTS** when we personally experience God's Love and Truth winning can ignite deep joy within. In general, we can learn that being involved in heavenly blessings and unfoldings may very well lead us into a depth and power of gladness that our natural words cannot describe. And this is why joys coming from God's divine leading and purposes in life. And when they do, we may become overflowing in joy and happiness—so much so that in essence such joys are ineffable. Time and again during Christ's ministry exuberance and joy were brought forth—as when Jesus turned water into choice wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

Another core truth about spiritual joy is that it can flow forth ultimately from life's more difficult struggles and sufferings. We see this demonstrated very well in the actual journey of Mary and Joseph, who faced immense risks and dangers by saying “yes” to God who needed their assistance to fulfill the prophecies and plans of God's Redemption. And out of their willingness to say “yes” to the Lord's Advent plans, even in our world's midnight bleakness, a new sunrise of hope, love and peace was born in Bethlehem, in the humble birth of our Lord. We find in this awesome true story of Christmas that spiritual joys came forth ultimately, even though King Herod hated when the ancient prophecies came true. He killed off all of the babies near Bethlehem up to two years of age, but he missed killing the infant Messiah King. Symbolically this reminds us that there will be attempts made in our own psyches to try to wipe out birthings of joy in daily life.

The birthing of new spiritual joys in our lives are part of what gives shape to the Lord's New Christianity, which flows out upon our world wherever lovingkindness and faith flow in and through goodness and service. As I soon conclude my message with you today, I'd like to share two quotes from our theology now:

The essence of love is that what is ours should belong to someone else. Feeling the joy of someone else as joy in ourselves—that is loving. (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 47)

The nature of the Lord's joy surpasses all understanding because it is that of the Infinite. Infinite joy exists when goodness is received by those in heaven and in the Church. (*Secrets of Heaven* 8672)

In conclusion, let us not be seekers of joy and gladness. Rather, may we be servants of God's goodwill toward all humanity. May we be secret agents of the Lord's ongoing ministry in this world by way of humble usefulness, living through kindness and compassion—while giving God the credit for our kindness. Indeed, infinite and ineffable joy lives through us when we participate in the good that love does. And as our Lord said so well: "When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in His love. ¹¹ I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!" (John 15:10-11)

Amen.