

January 21, 2024, third Sunday of Epiphany

Pastor Laurie L. Newman

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

Jazz Sunday

What brings joy to you? Where do you see glimmers of joy?

This past week has been pretty harrowing for some of us! Falling trees, icy roads, lack of heat with arctic temperatures, dwindling pantries—all this, forced many of us into a sort of survival mode. One person I spoke to said that the ice reminded her of the early days of COVID, and she struggled, almost immediately with a sense of isolation. In addition to our need for shelter, and heat, I've been thinking about what poet Maya Angelou wrote about our human needs.

“We need joy as we need air. We need Love as we need water. We need each other as we need the earth we share.” We need joy! And we need each other.

Though she wrote about the need for joy, Maya Angelou, wrote several volumes exploring the themes of economic, racial, and sexual oppression. She experienced violence as a young child. That trauma made her keep silence for years. She was completely mute for a while. But, eventually, she found her voice, her memoir is called: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Her voice makes clear that in the even midst of human suffering, there is also sweetness and joy to be found.

She wrote: “It’s the fire in my eyes. It’s the flash of my teeth. It’s the swing of my waist. And the joy in my feet. . . “

So, friends, today: whatever you bring to this moment, if you are feeling good, or tired, happy, or struggling—remember and trust that sweetness and joy are to be found.

Friends, I believe that we are not human beings trying to become “spiritual”. We are spiritual beings learning to become human. The scriptures show us that God loves human- beings, has called us good (in spite of all our problems and failings) and has faith in us and purpose for us. Back in the second century, one of the early church fathers, Irenaeus of Lyons put it this way: “The glory of God is the fully alive human being.”

Fully alive! Maybe that goal seemed easier on January 1. Three weeks later, we may have already given up on our resolutions, especially after dealing with a lot of stress. Being a fully alive human being is not easy. And it’s virtually impossible, when we are suffused with worry, or fear, or anger.

I’m wondering: what if we invite God to transform our worries into living more consciously in the present? Can we find joy at our center? I believe we can, but it takes healing.

Deep fear, unhealed anger, grief, loneliness, trauma, lovelessness, and manipulation – can make us resistant to trust and love. Often it is difficult to discern that we are wounded and blocked by unhealed pain. We can learn by noticing the aspects of ourselves that get labeled “negative” : our tendency to worry, hair-trigger anger, compulsive over-control, inertia and procrastination, manipulating or closing off to others, our constant broken resolutions.

Some faith teaching has focused merely on confessing our faults, as sins and using willpower to increase our positive aspects. The passage we heard with the command “don’t worry” doesn’t

sound like good news for someone with an anxiety disorder, for example. Healing is not about our willpower, but about God's grace to help us. Our part is letting go, and letting God. Remember, we are spiritual beings learning to become human.

This is part of what makes gathering as church different than other , meaningful works of giving and service. We, as followers of Jesus can support one another in inviting God's love and healing into our tender issues. God can give us the courage to gently look at our failings and faults . These aspects that are labeled "Negative"—they can teach us about our longings and needs.

I have always had a tendency towards worry. I'm remembering how worried I was in the first month I came here to be your interim pastor. My oldest son in graduate school in Wisconsin, went into the hospital my first week on the job here. It wasn't life threatening, but he did need hospitalization for 9 days. I was in the midst of shifting medical coverage from my old employer to the new. The medical bill was steep, something that I knew could wipe out my bank accounts. It took a few months to get it all settled. In the midst of that worry, it was difficult to trust.

My son, Alex, helped me, though. First of all, he recovered and rebounded quickly. But on top of the physical recovery, I learned that he had very good friends in Madison, Wisconsin. One friend got him to the hospital, stayed with him through the days, and FaceTime with me, so that I could be updated from afar. When I had filed all the papers, I set aside worry, and then noticed the glimmer of joy that came from seeing my wonderful, young adult son, building his life in a new place, with good support from loved ones.

God's healing seems to wait for our longing and consent. We're not helpless puppets, but co-creators with God. When we create with God, we are going to experience glimmers of joy.

Where do you experience glimmers of joy?

Over the past couple of weeks, aware of how many were struggling with extreme cold and loss of power; watching the Iowa caucuses and the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza, my hope was that our worship today would uplift and lighten the load a bit. Then, I began thinking about adversity, and the roots of jazz.

Jazz music arose from people who had been enslaved. What we're hearing this morning, jazz and ragtime, has roots in both West Africa music and the Western European Classical tradition. This genre of jazz is highly energetic, and often joyful, but keep in mind that it came from adversity. Jazz expresses freedom. And, though it emerged from the experiences of slavery, joy shines through.

We are spiritual beings, learning to be human. Today, as we continue to sing, tap feet, break bread and share together, may we find the glimmers of joy necessary for healing, for growth, for life.

What joy might you notice today? How can you share that with someone else?