



## Rejoicing with dissonance

Sermon for Sunday, Dec. 13, 2020 (3rd Sunday of Advent, Year B)

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It is the third Sunday in Advent... the Sunday of "joy." Today we light the rose-colored candle in the Advent wreath, symbolizing joy at the coming of Christ into our midst.

Our second reading from 1 Thessalonians contains one of my favorite verses about rejoicing in the Bible. **"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."** 1 Thessalonians 5:18. It was the first scripture verse I ever committed to memory.

"Giving thanks in ALL circumstances" is a tall order, however, especially for someone like me, who is easily disgruntled and complains a lot. I'm always amazed by people who can keep an upbeat and positive attitude even in the most dire of circumstances – people like Claudia Brown, a parishioner at St. John's who inspired and encouraged others over the past many months even while she was dying of cancer. I once told a seminary classmate of mine that I knew I could never inspire people while feeling awful and fighting a sickness, and her response, without missing a beat, was "That's ok, you have other gifts."

Though that may be true, I suppose it's always the gifts we don't have that most impress us, and so I've always been inspired by those who have the ability to "give thanks in all circumstances" in a genuine way. For me, if I'm not *feeling* thankful or joyful, it always feels forced to give thanks or shout with joy.

Early in my Christian journey, I discovered the music of Nichole Nordeman, and found her honest wrestling with the difficult aspects of faith to be refreshing and relieving. A song called "To Say Thanks," from her first album, released in 1998, resonated with my experience of finding it difficult to give thanks in all circumstances.

*If all that's good and true*

*comes from heaven, she sings,  
Then what's a girl to do  
when it rains?*

*And I'm saying,  
"Why, why, why, why?"  
I'm shaking a fist in the dark,  
and I'm asking,  
"Why, why, why, why?  
Why does it keep getting harder  
To say thanks?"*

That's why, when I first heard the musical setting of Psalm 126 that we sang today, it spoke to me so deeply – because it gave voice to the dissonant and incongruent place from which I often find myself giving thanks in the midst of suffering.

This arrangement came from St. James's Episcopal Church in Cambridge, MA, the first Episcopal church I was part of as a lay person, while living in the Boston area during graduate school. The congregation had a tradition of writing their own musical settings of the psalms, and this one was written by the congregation's music director, Pat Michaels.

Many years ago, while worshipping at St. James's, I found myself in church on the third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of joy, in the midst of a period in my life when I did not feel very joyful. In a time when I know I could NOT have sung along authentically with an upbeat and cheerful hymn like "I've got joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart," I found that I COULD sing along authentically with this setting of Psalm 126, because the music gave voice to what I was feeling.

The tune wasn't totally in sync with the sentiment the words expressed, and that dissonance resonated with me. "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad, we are glad indeed," we sang, but the music didn't sound entirely happy or joyful. It sounded a little "blue," written in a bluesy or jazz style. The verses chanted by soloists were plaintive and almost mournful, even as they sang words about being "filled with laughter and shouts of joy."

I found myself reflecting on how much like my own rejoicing this psalm setting was: toned-down, slightly dissonant, colored with a hint of sorrow, of regret, of depression... but nonetheless rejoicing.

I knew that I had things for which to be grateful, things for which I could authentically rejoice – even when I didn't FEEL happy. Somehow, this musical setting expressed that in such a way that I could make peace with the fact that I didn't feel happy as I gave thanks. Today, as we find ourselves called to rejoice in the midst of a global pandemic bringing unspeakable loss to our world, I wanted to share this musical setting of Psalm 126 with you in the hopes that it will bring you a similar sense of comfort, a way to give thanks authentically even if you're not feeling happy.

I'd like to close with a reading from American poet W.S. Merwin that gives voice to humanity's ability to continue giving thanks even in our darkest times. It was written in 1988, but it sounds like it could have been written about 2020, this poignant and dissonant year in which we have had so much to be grateful for, even in the midst of deep pain. On this Sunday of Joy, may we be encouraged to continue to "give thanks in all circumstances, for that is God's will for us in Christ Jesus."

## *Thanks*

[W. S. Merwin](#) (1927-2019)

Listen

with the night falling we are saying thank you  
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings  
we are running out of the glass rooms  
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky  
and say thank you  
we are standing by the water thanking it  
standing by the windows looking out  
in our directions  
back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging  
after funerals we are saying thank you  
after the news of the dead  
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you  
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators  
remembering wars and the police at the door  
and the beatings on stairs we are saying thank you

in the banks we are saying thank you  
in the faces of the officials and the rich  
and of all who will never change  
we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us  
our lost feelings we are saying thank you  
with the forests falling faster than the minutes  
of our lives we are saying thank you  
with the words going out like cells of a brain  
with the cities growing over us  
we are saying thank you faster and faster  
with nobody listening we are saying thank you  
we are saying thank you and waving  
dark though it is

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