

I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s – the world you see in MadMen, the age of advertising, the age of illusion. Television and magazines showed us the possibilities of who we could be and perhaps more insidious who we should be. I thought I knew what I wanted: a house with a beautiful kitchen – it’s funny that all advertising was focused on the kitchen. I wanted a avocado green stove, refrigerator and dishwasher, a four slice toaster and I wanted to be the woman at home in that kitchen - you know her – wearing a dress with an apron, stirring a pot, frosting a cake while her 3 young children colored at the kitchen table. Maybe we baby boomers were particularly susceptible or maybe advertising and manufacturing created those desires. All I know is that the hours Don Draper spent on created ads were not wasted when it comes to me. Even when I embraced the fact that I was a lesbian and began to have girlfriends, I still somehow thought the General Electric future would be mine.

Those dreams I conjure/conjured up were not really dreams – they were the imaginings of a young girl who didn’t know who she was or who she should be. The dreams of Psalm 126 were those of an exiled people with the hope, perhaps the promise, of returning to their homeland. “We were like those who dream. ²Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” The celebration of the liberated was not a dream dreamed up on Madison Avenue, it was a dream of generations of the disposed. Just the thought of returning home seemed so wonderful, so unbelievable, the only response they could make was joy.

Our advent candle today is the Joy candle; our psalm is a joyful psalm. The Joy of the exiled returning home. Boy, do we know about that. Even though our exile is to our homes, still we are missing so much – our celebrating is tinged with mourning. The recent talk about a vaccine has allowed us to dream, to imagine, to wonder what our post-Covid world will be. Will there be changes we can’t envision? Will we wonder as we wander under the sky – is it safe? Is it real?

Writing in my journal a few nights ago I imagined everyone coming out of their houses, their apartments, their shelters – everyone - dancing, high fiving, glowing with the joy of having seen our world, lost it and at least partially regained it. Ecstatic, weeping for joy. Letting joy waft around us until it starts to get late, maybe a little chilly, so we stop our dancing and go back inside – but this time with the assurance that we can come back out whenever we want. It is true that the joy of reunion will be intense and, I hope, universal but once we are back inside our lives will be the ones we left to dance in the streets. Happiness is not Joy; Joy cannot be conjured up. Joy cannot be bought. For me, one indication that I’ve left the realm of joy to enter the one of consumerism, is the pace of my pulse. The choices are overwhelming; there is so much to choose from; so many places to buy things; so many styles, colors, prices. And still among them, somehow in the midst of all that abundance, we fall prey to a mindset of scarcity. Get it now! Book that room – there’s only one left. Whether it is a dream we are trying to furnish or a person we’re trying to become – it is anything but Joy.

Joy can't be created and it can't be dismantled. Joy is a gift from the universe, a gift from God. Joy can be God, Godself. We have been exiled for months – some of us alone, some of us with too many people, some with the wrong people, some with the right people but still longing for other people – surprising people, new people, funny people – someone we've encountered on the MTA. We've been exiled and we've cancelled plans and we've bought Netflix, Prime Video, Hulu, HBO and there's still nothing to watch. For some of us this time has been one of mourning – we've lost loved ones without even a goodbye.

So where is the Joy I promised? That's the thing about joy – you can't locate it, it finds you. And, joy is no stranger to the struggle or the sorrow. Joy can find you even when you are in tears, joy can bring you to tears.

The length of this Pandemic has allowed us to have moments of joy I might have missed. The three of us standing on our back deck in quiet wonder at the owl hooting that was coming from two different directions. We were statues of wonder – not wanting to possess anything – just experiencing the Joy. That's the thing about joy – it cannot be possessed. That's where we confuse joy with pleasure. Joy must be a gift; Many of my moments of Joy are a glimpse into nature. And those joyful encounters with nature are encounters with the divine, with God. God has created us to know beauty, to know joy – in mountains and in ant hills.

There is no doubt we will be making changes and compromises this year in our holidays, painful changes. So Paul's words to "rejoice always" seem a cruel taunt. Yet, he gives us the tools for constant rejoicing – prayer and gratitude; the elements of rejoicing in all circumstances – even a pandemic that wreaks havoc with our holidays. Steve Garness-Holmes, a pastor poet says that joy is the healing of broken hearts, the breaking of chains, the opening of graves, the coming of God.

And for me, the coming of God is through prayer, prayer that is open and yearning, prayer that comes from the deepest part of me and invites God there. I've experienced God's presence whether I've come in confession or in despair. You could say that the resulting gratitude and connection of prayer are what rejoicing always feels like. I've told this story before about my living in Brussels and being terrified as I entered a classroom for advanced French – in desperation I asked Jesus to come with me and instantly the heaviness in my chest lifted. That was a moment of joy born of relief. And that moment of intense joy was the floodgate for rejoicing always. I was very lonely over there and very closeted; I know now how many opportunities I missed by feeling I couldn't be myself; but there was the gift of Jesus with me in the many hours I wandered around Brussels alone. I felt his presence and a calm I had never known before.

A state of desperation is not the only starting place to encounter joy; the exiles in Babylon had given up so much desperation was a long ago emotion. No matter what state you are in, Joy can always break through despite our busyness, our attempts to create joy for ourselves. From Steve Garness-Holmes again: Joy is not happiness with present circumstances, but harmony with the goodness of God and the overflowing of

God's delight in us.

It is my hope that joy will rescue us from despair or discontent this Advent and Christmas season. And my conviction that the dancing flame on the pink Joy candle the McCall-Taylors lit this morning is a visual representation of the promise from God of joy, joy that can appear in the most unlikely of circumstances, from the most improbable of ingredients. Scripture says, weeping may tarry in the night, but Joy comes in the morning. May you be there in the morning to receive it. AMEN