

Joy: The Resilient Celebration

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Picture four elderly ranchers in a northern Arizona café, cups of coffee in hand, talking about cattle, weather, and the “good old days.” One of them leans over and asks Roy about his upcoming 50th wedding anniversary. Roy answers, “For our 25th anniversary, I took the missus to Tucson. For our 50th, I’m thinking about going down there again to pick her up.”

Any marriage that lasts fifty years is a testament to more than first love. It shows resilience—the steady decision to stay, endure, and keep a promise even when life becomes ordinary or hard.

If a human relationship requires that kind of long-haul commitment, how much more does our life of faith? This is the invitation of the Third Sunday of Advent, *Gaudete* Sunday—the Sunday of Joy. The scriptures today point us toward a particular kind of joy, not fragile happiness that depends on circumstances, but joy that is resilient and rooted in who God is and what God is doing in the world. Psalm 146 and James 5 do not describe joy as a quick feeling or a seasonal mood. They present joy as a steady, hopeful way of living while we wait for the coming of the Lord.

During Advent, especially in a suburban American context, the pressure to “be happy” is intense. Decorations glow, music plays, and advertisements promise that if everything looks bright enough, happiness should follow. Yet many people carry grief, loneliness, health concerns, financial anxiety, and fear about the future. The gap between the demand to be cheerful and the reality of our hearts can be painful. Scripture points in another direction. Joy is not denial. Joy is trust.

Psalm 146 begins with praise and then explains why joy and trust belong not in circumstances, powerful people, or personal strength, but in the God who keeps faith forever. The psalm declares that those are truly happy whose help and hope are in the Lord—a happiness deeper than mood and more durable than emotion. This joy grows from trusting the One who does not forget or abandon creation. Holiday happiness can be loud on the surface and empty underneath. Psalm 146 offers joy that comes from placing help and hope in the living God.

The psalm then describes what God does: maker of heaven and earth, keeper of faith forever, bringer of justice for the oppressed, giver of food to the hungry, liberator of prisoners, opener of blind eyes, lifter of those who are bowed down, protector of strangers, and upholder of the orphan and the widow. The foundation of resilient joy is not positive thinking but the faithful, ongoing work of God. This joy assumes that oppression exists, that people hunger, that lives bend under weight. It is not the joy of those who never suffer, but of those who trust that even in suffering, God is at work for justice, mercy, and restoration.

For our congregation, and for any community that has known loss and change, this is good news. Bodies weaken, communities shift, beloved friends die, and churches can feel smaller and more fragile. Yet the God of Psalm 146 does not grow old or weary. This joy also pushes outward. If God cares for the hungry, the stranger, and the vulnerable, then God's people are called to share in that work. Joy is not only an inner feeling; it becomes a way of life shaped by compassion and justice. For a predominantly older congregation, Advent joy is not only about comfort or nostalgia. It is about asking, "Where is God's heart turned right now, and how can we join in?"

James 5:7–10 moves from the source of joy to the practice of joy. James urges patience until the coming of the Lord, using the image of a farmer waiting for the precious crop. The farmer cannot control the rain or force growth, yet the farmer is not passive. While waiting, the farmer tends the field with trust. Advent joy is like that. It is not the joy of having everything now, but the joy of being anchored in a promised future.

James writes to believers facing hardship and injustice. The call to patience is not permission to accept injustice as normal. It is an invitation to endure without losing heart, trusting that God's justice is coming. This resilient joy looks ahead to Christ's coming—not only in Bethlehem long ago, but in glory yet to come—and lets that future shape how the present is lived. In a culture trained for instant results, patient joy becomes a quiet but powerful witness.

There is another dimension of joy in these readings. Joy is not reserved for those who are comfortable. Psalm 146 centers on people society often overlooks: the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, strangers, orphans, and widows. James addresses believers who are suffering. Advent joy is not private or inward-looking. It is tied to God's concern for those on the margins. A congregation that celebrates only its own comfort may experience moments of happiness, but it will miss the deeper joy these scriptures proclaim.

Joy grows as God's people allow their lives, resources, and ministries to become instruments of mercy. That may mean feeding the hungry, caring for those who are homebound or lonely, or offering simple acts of presence and kindness. In the Wesleyan tradition, this is social holiness: faith lived out in love of neighbor. Joy is not only what is felt in worship; it is what is practiced in daily life. When a church, even in its smallness, joins God's work, it discovers a joy larger than itself.

So what does “Joy: The Resilient Celebration” look like this Advent? It begins with honesty. Joy does not require pretending everything is fine. Burdens, sorrows, and fears can be brought before God without shame. In that honesty, joy takes root, because it is joy in the God who meets people where they are.

Resilient joy also calls for patient perseverance. This church may be smaller than it once was. Some may worry about the future. James would say, “Strengthen your hearts.” Keep tending the field. Keep worshiping, praying, and serving. Growth often happens beneath the surface, unseen but real. The Spirit is at work even when results are not immediately visible.

Finally, resilient joy sends the church outward. Ask this Advent: Who nearby is hungry or lonely? Who feels forgotten or left behind? Who sits quietly in the pews or behind closed doors, carrying stories no one has asked to hear? A phone call, a visit, a shared meal, a handwritten note, or a word of encouragement can become a sign of God’s remembering love. These acts may seem small, but in God’s economy they are never insignificant. They become visible reminders that hope is alive and that joy is not abstract. Such gestures say, without many words, “You matter, and you are not alone.” These small acts are true celebration, joining heaven’s joy whenever compassion takes flesh.

The café joke makes people laugh because it hides neglect beneath celebration. The gospel offers the opposite surprise. When the world feels forgotten, God comes near. When people feel overlooked, Christ is born among the least. Joy is not denial of pain; it is trust in God’s faithful presence. On this Third Sunday of Advent, may we live into “Joy: The Resilient Celebration,” joy rooted in God’s character, practiced in patient waiting, and expressed in justice and mercy for all whom God loves. Amen.