Third Sunday of Advent, Cycle B

Old St. Pat’s, 2021

The prophet says, “shout for joy”

– and the world scoffs

Zephaniah sings “be glad and exult with all your heart”

 – and the nation calls it mockery

St. Paul commands “rejoice in the Lord always”

 –yet war abounds and children starve

The Apostle advises, “have no anxiety”

 – as the pandemic rages

And the Baptist preaches good news.

In the words of one blogger:

These are beautiful exhortations, and I wish I didn’t find them so jarring.  But “rejoice” and “exult” are churchy words ... that don’t jibe easily with my 21stcentury mindset.  “Joy” itself is such an overused word in America’s Christmas lexicon, I find it impenetrable.  And as for shouting aloud?  That’s a pretty tall order for a self-conscious introvert.  Worse … the lectionary essentially commands us to rejoice.  Even on my best days, I resent commands — especially the sort that tell me what to feel. Rejoice?  Sing praises?  Shout?  “No!” my inner two-year-old screams, stomping her foot and crossing her arms.  “I don’t want to.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Despite the fact that the stock market is up

 Unemployment has dropped to almost 4%

 60% of U.S. citizens are vaccinated

 And most appear to be in post-thanksgiving buying spree

The happiness meter is not very happy these days

 with the consumer confidence index plummeting[[2]](#endnote-2)

 and the National Opinion Research Center

 suggesting that more than in previous decades

 Americans are unhappy and pessimistic about the future.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Laurie Santos is a psychologist teaching at Yale University.

noticing that students seemed increasingly anxious even depressed

 she created what has become

 The most popular course in the 300+ history of that school:

 “Psychology and the Good Life”

 Now packaged as a podcast called “The Happiness Lab”[[4]](#endnote-4)

 In the fall of 2019 she hosted the poet Ross Gay[[5]](#endnote-5)

 Ross tells the story that once,

 while walking a path between two farms

 surrounded by acres of sunflowers

 Linden trees and wildflowers humming with bees

 the experience was so captivating that he decided

 to write an essay about that enchanting moment.

 That single essay eventually evolved into the book

*365 Days of Delight*

 containing essays written every day for a year

 about delight, and beauty and joy.

 In her interview on the happiness lab

Prof. Santos wanted to talk about happiness

 But Gay’s book is subtitled *A Poet’s guide to finding Joy*

So he preferred to talk about joy

 Offering provocative insights

 On his journey into what he calls this mature emotion.

 In the interview the poet made it clear

 that he achieving joy was a labor,

 something you had to work at,

 more rigorous than misery.

 Lots of folk effortlessly share what they hate

 but find it much more difficult

 to share what gives them this deep delight.

 The poet then noted that his book was not a happiness journal

 And contended that joy was as much about

 Holding each other’s sorrow as having a great day,

 Then observing, I don’t think you can have joy without grief.

While that might sound contradictory

 it also sounds as quite revelatory

 about the Christian life

 and this third Sunday of Advent’s call

 to rejoice and shout for joy

 in the midst of so much suffering in our world

 and often in our own families.

In his book on human perception the neuroscientist Beau Lotto

makes some assertions about the human brain

 That support the poet’s instinct

 To hold joy and sorry together.

 One is that the human brain is activated by contrast.

 He illustrates this by citing various eye and vision experiments

 concluding that contrast is so essential to vision

 That if contrasts were eliminated, we would go blind

 He then generalizes more broadly about human perception

 Noting that detecting differences or contrasts

 is so essential to the functioning of our brains

 That when our senses are deprived of different relationships

 They can shut down.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The comments of the poet and the neuroscientist

 Help me understand a story about St. Francis

 That has always sort of puzzled me.

 It is a story found in the collection called the “Little Flowers”

In which St. Francis tries to explain to his companion,

Brother Leo, the nature of true joy.[[7]](#endnote-7)

*As the two walked in the winter cold, Francis repeatedly told Leo examples of what perfect joy is not. For example, he said, “If the friars were to make the lame to walk, if they should make straight the crooked, chase away demons, give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the dumb, and, what is even a far greater work, if they should raise the dead after four days, write that this would not be perfect joy.”*

*Eventually, Brother Leo asked Francis to explain what he meant by perfect joy. Francis responded by describing the possibility where they would arrive at their destination after walking in the rain and cold and, upon presenting themselves as brothers were accused of lying and turned away. That, Francis said, would be perfect joy.*

*He went on to add, “And if we knock again, and the porter comes out in anger to drive us away with oaths and blows, as if we were vile impostors, saying, ‘Begone, miserable robbers, for here you shall neither eat nor sleep!’ If we accept all this with patience, with joy, and with charity, O Brother Leo, write that this indeed is perfect joy.”*

I have always understood that story

 As Francis’ way to join his suffering with Christ

 And in that find perfect joy …

 But the poet and the neuroscience also nudge me to believe

 That in my sorrow, my rejection, my suffering

 I can bring the empathy, the respect, the care

 When others experience such sorry, rejection and suffering

 That could be a deep experience of mature joy

 For them as well as for me.

A key turning point in today’s gospel is when folk ask John

 what they should do to truly repent

 And find the path that leads to true joy.

 Notice John does not tell them to erase their sorrows

 To lament their plight in the world

 Or even to simply repent for their sins and shortcomings.

 Rather he tells them to take their experiences,

their limited power and resources,

for these appear to be middle management folk at best,

 And use them for the good of others …

 Providing an opportunity for those with less

 Less goods, less influence, less social mobility

 To, in their own way, at least momentarily shout for joy.

It’s been almost a decade since I read Greg Boyle’s

*Tattoos on the heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion.*

As you might remember, “Fr. G.” is a Jesuit

Who founded and directed Homeboy Industries

The world’s largest gang-intervention and rehabilitation program

As you can imagine, as pastor

of the poorest Catholic Church in LA

 located in gang central between two housing projects

 “G” experienced lots of trauma, violence, death

Burying more victims of violence than even he could remember.

At the same time, this memoire

Is filled with stories of amazing delight.

One that came to mind this joy shouting Sunday

Concerns a 23 yo homey, Miguel who worked on the graffiti crew:

Boyle writes:

He was an extremely nice kid whose pleasantness was made all the more remarkable by the fact that he had been completely abandoned by his family. He calls me one New Year’s Day, “Happy New Year, G.” “Hey that was very thoughtful of you dog,” I say.

“You know Miguel I was thinking of you on Christmas. So what did you do for Christmas,” I asked, knowing that he had no family to welcome him in. “Oh you know, I was just right here,” meaning his tiny little apartment. “All by yourself,” I ask. “Oh no,” he says, “I invited homeys from the crew, you know, *vato’s* like me who didn’t have no place to go for Christmas.” “Really,” I tell him, “that sure what nice of you.” But he has me revered and curious, “So,” I ask him “what did you do.” “Well,” he says, “You’re not going to believe this but I cooked a turkey.” You could feel his pride right through the phone. “Wow, you did? Well how’d you prepare it?” He says, “ghetto style.” I tell him that I am not really familiar with this recipe. “Ya, well you just rub it with a gang of butter, throw a bunch of salt and pepper on it squeeze a couple of limone’s over it, and put in the oven. It tasted proper.” I said, “Wow, that’s impressive; what else did you have besides the turkey?” “Just that, just turkey,” he says. His voices tapers to a hush. “Yah, the six of us we just sat there staring at the oven, waiting for the turkey to be done.”

Boyle concludes: one would be hard-pressed to image something more sacred and ordinary than these six orphans staring at an oven together. It is the entire law and the prophets, all in one moment right there in one humble, holy kitchen.[[8]](#endnote-8)

From deep want, experiences of abundance

From profound sorry, the potential for delight

From isolating loneliness, the emergence of community

From impenetrable darkness, the promise of an eternal dawn

But only if we too seek not to be consoled but to consoled

 Not to be understood but to understand

 Not to be loved so much as to love

 For it is in giving that we receive

 It is in pardoning that we are pardoned

 And it is in dying that we ultimately find true joy

 Through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2030-what-then-should-we-do> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.conference-board.org/data/consumerconfidence.cfm> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.norc.org/PDFs/COVID%20Response%20Tracking%20Study/Historic%20Shift%20in%20Americans%20Happiness%20Amid%20Pandemic.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/publications/observer/obsonline/santos-science-of-the-good-life-is-now-just-a-click-away.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.ttbook.org/interview/laboratory-joy-psychologist-science-feeling-good> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Beau Lotto, *Deviate: The science of seeing Differently* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017), 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ugolino/flowers.iii.viii.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)