



Hallelujah, anyhow

December 12, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Sixth Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Since at least the Middle Ages, the next to last Sunday in Advent has been called *Gaudete*, or “Rejoice” Sunday. The idea was that the penitential practices and tone of Advent (when Advent was more like Lent than it is today) needed a break. I also think our ancestors in faith in the Northern hemisphere, in their pre-modern wisdom, may also have been onto the symptoms of seasonal affective disorder. The days are still getting shorter, and those of us inclined to depression can use all the help we can get.

And so, the liturgical colors include a gentler, rose color. Hence the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreathes; some churches have rose colored chasubles and stoles and altar paraments. And the Scripture passages focused on joy. You’ll notice that the passage from Philippians that we hear this morning begins with the imperative to “rejoice;” and in fact, the words “rejoice” or “joy: appear in this short letter *sixteen* times. Amazingly, Paul writes this letter in the year 55 or so to his church in Philippi from *prison*, of all places, as he awaits trial for preaching about Jesus, but even the proximity of death is no match for the joy that the Spirit gives him.

The Prophet Zephaniah exhorts the people of Israel “to rejoice and exult with all your heart in thanksgiving for the Lord’s deliverance.” And Zephaniah even says the Lord will “rejoice in you.” Isaiah encourages the people to “sing the praises of the Lord for the marvelous works of the Lord; and to ring out your joy.”

Scripture has a huge amount to say about joy. About ten times as much as “happiness” for instance, if a basic word search for the words “joy” and “happiness” tells the story. It comes in simple things, like “wine brings joy to the heart,” as the psalmist tells us. (104.15.) There is a proverb that compares the joy of a sweet-smelling perfume with the joy of friendship (Proverbs 27.9) There is the joy the Israelites felt as they were delivered from the Egyptians and the Babylonians. And especially, as Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, “I have come so my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Joy weathers the storm. It is not dependent on external circumstance. It can be complex. Whether things are going well, or poorly, joy can be present. Joy and sorrow, for example, can both be present at a funeral, where we give joyful thanks for the life of the person who is dying, even as we grieve their passing. We can experience joy in the presence of a dear friend, or a favorite place or moment in nature, or in the throes of an athletic or musical pursuit. In this sense, Joy is deeply connected to gratitude.

We can feel it in watching a child or another loved one participating in something they love to do, like dance or music or sports or drama. In this sense, joy is linked to pride, as in “so and so is her pride and joy.”



Hallelujah, anyhow

December 12, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Sixth Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

We can feel joy at a wedding, or a graduation, or a baptism or a birth. In this sense, joy is connected to hope and promise for the future. But most of all, joy can be present when nothing is going right, and everything is going wrong.

As Henri Nouwen writes, “Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death – can take that love away.” <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/excerpts/view/14116> That is, of course is the central truth of our faith—that after Crucifixion there is Resurrection, for Jesus and his love cannot be kept down.

Now, the Gospel reading this morning may seem to be at odds with a proclamation about joy. The accusatory phrase, “You brood of vipers” is not calculated by John the Baptist to elicit joy. But I think John actually is helpful in a couple of ways as we muse on joy.

First: John is definitely about keeping it real. He gives us permission to see our pain. For real joy to take root, we need to see our lives as they really are, with fierce clarity. We need to see where we really are in relationship to God our neighbor and ourselves. We need to see the reality of those places in our lives where there is brokenness.

John also lays out the preconditions for joy: generosity—he tells his first century listeners, and us, share your coats and your food. And integrity: he tells the soldiers and tax collectors and us: treat people with dignity and respect, do not cheat people out of what is theirs; do not use your power to intimidate. When you are actively hurting others, or withholding your blessings, joy will not take root.

And finally, I think John’s emphasis on “keeping it real” may also be helpful to those of us for whom the cultural pressure to feel, or at least seem, jolly during this season feels at odds with our heartbreaks and disappointments, our unmet longings and continuing sorrows. But that’s the thing about Joy. You don’t have to pretend that everything is fine. You don’t have to pretend that you have the world on a string. Joy can flourish alongside of heartache.

Most of us here are likely familiar with the Rt. Rev. Barbara C. Harris, of blessed memory, who was bishop suffragan in Massachusetts from 1988 to 2003, and who died the week that the covid pandemic began in 2020. She was the first woman elected a bishop in the Anglican communion, and she was also an African American. Recently I was reading her memoir and learned she was confirmed as a young Christian exactly 80 years ago last night—December 11, 1941. You may have heard her tell the story about how the white bishop who confirmed her at St. Barnabas Church in Philadelphia, wore white gloves, so as to not touch black skin.



Hallelujah, anyhow

December 12, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Sixth Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

The name of Bishop Harris' memoir is *Hallelujah, Anyhow*. By her own admission, hymns were just about the most important part of her Christian faith; they were to her like water and air. These hymns came from the august Anglican tradition joined by the powerful stream of African American hymnody that was the fruit of slavery and Jim Crow. And the verses of this hymn speak to the possibility and presence of joy in all circumstances:

Hallelujah anyhow,
Never let your troubles get you down.
When trials come your way,
Hold your head high and say,
Hallelujah anyhow.

Alongside the slights and discrimination, in the prejudices and death threats, in her sufferings as a woman and as person of color, she held on to the promise of the joy of Jesus.

When you're feeling down and out,
throw your hands up high and shout,
Hallelujah, anyhow
'cause I'm wrapped up, tied up, tangled up in Jesus.
Singing Hallelujah anyhow.

As we make our way through our days, characterized as they are by joys and sorrows, ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies, we can do no better than to follow Bishop Barbara's example:

Hallelujah Anyhow.

Amen.