



April 3, 2022: The Last Sunday in Lent
Joy amidst it all
The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

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

Maybe it's just because I'm getting older, but time seems to be going faster. It doesn't seem like it can be April already. But I am glad that it is. Seeing the buds on the trees, beholding the unfolding of daffodil and tulip petals—especially from bulbs that I had planted last November but had completely forgotten about—feeling the warmth of the sun on my face; all of these, good things to be thankful for, especially in the midst of a time of heightened sensitivity and emotion, as Edie Dolnokowski referred to in her wonderful sermon last week. It just feels to me like there is *so much* happening.

Just for starters, I've been thinking of the war grinding on in Ukraine, the shameful hearings for the Supreme Court nominee, the continuing revelations from the January 6th Committee, fights over voting districts around the country, the 2nd anniversary of the Covid epidemic with nearly one million dead in our country alone, and apparently, a new variant on the move, the controversy at the Academy Awards, March Madness....and people feel very strongly about it all. I know I do. I found myself literally shouting curse words at my radio last week; radio rage, I'd call it.

Sometimes it's hard for a preacher to know whether people want to have him talk about what's happening in the culture to help make some meaning of it in light of the Gospel; or whether people would prefer to leave all that "out there" if that's even possible and focus on our more interior state.

Our texts this morning give us a place to rest in midst of so much swirling around. Isaiah tells the Israelites in exile in Babylon that God is "doing a new thing," even if it may be hard to see. The Psalmist proclaims his confidence in the joy that emerges beyond the tears in Zion. Paul, writing from prison, describes his passionate hunger for Jesus, a deeply joyful hunger that transcends the death that he knows is coming. And in the Gospel, in a passage dense with emotion that foretells the anointing of Jesus after his death, there is an extravagant act of stunning aromatic beauty, devotion, and generosity.

One of my hopes this Lent was to pursue a devotional path that was a bit less morose than my previous Lenten practices. I was helped in this by a monk who is a kind and helpful spiritual companion, my therapist, conversations with various people, some books I read, some prayer and reflection. My theme ended up being make space for delight, make space for joy.

And in part this was lived out by recommitting myself to be more successful at holding onto Sabbath time on Friday; to times of silence and prayer; to doing things that bring me joy like going to the gym, playing my drums, reading; to saying yes to spontaneous activities that arise at home. I have found Scripture passages about delight, and read books that helped me ratchet down anxieties and expectations around time management—including one called *4000 Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*. Four thousand weeks is the number of weeks that a typical, relatively healthy modern western person can live—about 76



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years. We are finite! Also, I have been reading *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy Humor and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life*.

But the bigger (re)discovery was that every moment has within it, or next to it, or near to it, the possibility of delight. God showers these moments upon us if we learn to recognize them.

I found a wonderful poem that I had filed away by the 13th century Persian, Islamic poet and scholar Rumi that illuminates this experience. It's called the *Guest House*. Here's part of it:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.//
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.//
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,
Still treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
For some new delight...

Now, this is **not** to deny the reality of real grief, heartache, and tragedy. And no one can dictate to another person when, or how, or where, amidst the circumstances of anxiety, fear, heartbreak, and death, one might find and experience the joy or delight of God's presence. But it is to say it's possible.

I believe God desires joy for us.

Our Bible passages today remind us of this truth. In the midst of sorrow and exile God is at work making something new. And it can be beautiful, joyful, delightful. Even the rather dark and foreboding Gospel passage shows this. It is a deeply complex scene. Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead; fearful religious authorities begin to plot Jesus' demise. Jesus goes underground but surfaces at the home of his dear friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary for a meal. It becomes clear after the meal that the authorities are plotting death for Lazarus as well. There is the love, generosity, and intimacy of friendship. There is the corrosive mist of jealousy, hypocrisy, and betrayal embodied in Judas. There are the erotic overtones of a Mary letting her hair down, using it to caress Jesus' feet.



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And into this space, heavy with pathos, Mary breaks open a bottle of perfume costing a year's wages for a common laborer. And the house was filled with the fragrance of love. A moment of tender, intimate, beauty, a kind of joy, in the midst of sorrow and conflict; extravagant compassion and generosity.

Next Sunday we begin the journey with Jesus toward his death. Palm Sunday begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and ends with a devastating foretaste of Good Friday. The shadow is long and dark, the pain and suffering are real. And though they are not the end, they cannot be rushed or evaded. It is God's desire that we know joy and delight, even as we learn that some suffering cannot be avoided if one is faithful. Jesus comes to help us learn to live faithfully in the midst of sorrow and joy.

Amen.