THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

December 12, 2021

*“How Much Is Enough?” Isaiah 12:2-6, Luke 3:10-14*

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent—the third Sunday of our deliberate period of waiting for Christ to be born into our lives. Each year we set aside these four Sundays. We step aside of the Christmas rush so much of the rest of the world is engaged in to reflect on God’s gift to humankind: God’s own presence in our midst.

Think of that: instead of calling *us* to draw closer, it is *God* who is drawing closer to *us!*

And so we commemorate God’s amazing act of grace by hearing and reflecting on passages from the Bible meant to inspire in us some idea of what this all means:

What does it mean to say that God is Emmanuel—the God who is with us?

What does it mean to believe that ours is a God who desires to fulfill our every need—which is wonderful but, goodness, what does that even *mean?* And then, there is the most obvious question: what do we need?

On this particular Sunday morning, the question is also modified to include “joy.” So what do we need in order to have *joy*?

As I was thinking about how to talk about this, I remembered an old song, and I was tempted to show a video of it—a video of Janis Joplin singing one of her most famous songs, *The Mercedes Benz Song* in which she asks God to give her the expensive foreign car in the title, along with a color TV and a night on the town. If she has those things she will have “joy,” I suppose.

Of course, when she first sang it, most people were scandalized and offended. How causally, how caustically Joplin threw around her requests before God. She sounded like a child making a Christmas list for Santa.

However, we *can* listen to her a little differently. We could actually hear her song as a way of making fun of modern consumerism. What Joplin was targeting then was a mindless desire for material goods, and the mindset that carries around a “gold” or platinum credit card with the same confidence and delight one of us might carry around our confidence in our Baptism.

Texts, like the passage we heard from Isaiah, present to us the same kind of celebratory pleasure as Janice Joplin’s song. It is even believed to have been a song, a hymn. In fact, in this short passage there are two hymns. Verse 2 is a hymn of trust, while verses 5 and 6 are a hymn of thanksgiving.

They are doxologies and songs of hope that comes from that trust Isaiah has in God. God is the source of more than consumer goods—more than manna in the wilderness. Rather, this is a God who gives us what we need for this day and the promise that God’s faithfulness will also be with us tomorrow, and the day after, and every day and night after that. In short, Isaiah is singing to the people of the God who is their salvation.

One scholar has also pointed out that verses 3 and 4 describes the kind of trust and thanksgiving that had been a part of the people’s life of worship in the days before their captivity in Babylon. In the water-drawing image, Isaiah was bringing back to the minds of the people the grand ritual procession that happened every year during the Feast of Tabernacles.

With the city lit up, priests would carry water from the pool of Siloam, through the water gate, and into the temple court. With music and singing, the High Priest would pour water on the altar. The Talmud says that “he who has not seen the delights of the water procession has not seen any of the pleasures of life (Sukkah, V, II).”

*This* is well-being. This memory of being a people in their own land, their own homes, worshiping freely, and living in peace—this is joy drawn from very deep wells, indeed.

The nagging question is: where does this joy come from. Yes, it comes from God, but how are we to live before God so that this “joy” will be prevalent in our lives?

In the passage we heard from the Gospel of John, these were the same questions asked of John the Baptist. In the verses immediately before the passage read for us, John has confronted the crowds of people, and instead of being so glad to see so many coming out to hear him and be baptized, John scolds them. He calls them a “brood of vipers,” and warns them that even their ancestry will not be enough to save them—no matter what Abraham did for them in the past, that will not save them now.

What must they do, they ask? In fact, three categories of people ask this question of John—the regular people, a tax collector, and some soldiers. All of them had the same question, the same desire to be at peace with God. What must we do, they asked?

John’s answer is concrete and decisive. In order to be at peace with God each person was charged to act in the same manner. No matter who they were, each was to act with honesty and compassion. Those who had power, like the tax collector and the soldier, were to deal honestly with the people who came to them. For both the Jewish tax collector and the Gentile soldier, the answer was the same.

The common people who asked were called upon to be compassionate with others. They were to notice the condition of the people around them and share what they had with them. In other words, everyone was supposed to care about other peoples’ lives—everyone’s life mattered. If you saw someone hungry, you shared with them what you had. If you saw someone cold and you have an extra coat, you give it to them.

The picture we get is of a people who are a community. It speaks to us of people who are willing to look into the faces of the people who are in need. Indeed, we can well imagine how this kind of regard for others also has the potential to build new relationships of care and support within the community.

Well, that is all very wonderful, but how, we must ask ourselves, how can we do that now, in this, the 21st century, and in our context?

The good news is that we are all very much in luck this morning because in a few moments, our guests from the YMCA will give you some information about how the Y is, and has been, doing the good work of community care and support among both the youngest in our communities and the most senior. *And* they are going to tell us how *we* can be a part of their mission.

This is one of the ways in which we can follow the directive John the Baptist offered people who wanted to know how to live peacefully and joyfully before God. We can do it by engaging in activities that offer fellowship, education, caring oversight, and nutrition.

We can also do this by advocating for laws and regulations within our community that have helped others care better for themselves and their families.

In fact, there is one such activity that will be happening in our neighborhood this coming week. The community advocacy group known as the Appleseed Foundation will be out waving signs on Pali Highway this Thursday in support of a mandate for a living wage here in Hawaii—a *living wage*. I intend on joining them, and I hope some of you will too.

Many of us, when we hear of such things, we groan inwardly and think, “Oh, higher costs for everybody!”

To those of us who think this way and have this reaction, what I would like you to really hear is the term, “living wage,” “living.” This should make us all stop and think about what is being said and being asked. What is being proposed is that people who work get paid according to how much it costs to *live* in this community.

It has always been difficult to live here in Hawai‘i financially. However, once upon a time, when most of us in this Sanctuary were a lot younger, it was not as hard as it is now. Rents and necessities like food and health care were not as expensive. Times were often hard, but not impossible. Young people left for the mainland in order to secure better paying jobs and lower cost housing, and they still do, but now even they are finding it much more difficult.

Here is why I will be sign-waving with the Appleseed Foundation. To me, a living wage means that fewer people will constantly change jobs in search of better working conditions and compensation. More money in their pockets means that more children will receive the nutrition and parental support they need because their parents will have more money to spend on food and shelter, and are no longer as stressed, or absent because they have to work. Here in Hawaii, it could mean that mom and dad only work two jobs each instead of three.

Finally, a living wage treats people with fairness and dignity. And if more people get to know what it is like to be treated with respect for the work they do, this makes for a whole community of people who are less anxious, who are more confident and at peace, more hopeful because they have lives that are more secure. And if more people in our communities are secure this means all of us are more secure.

In short, a living wage has the potential of making our communities much more secure because many more people will live with the well-being—the *joy*—the joy of being treated fairly and honestly, they will have more peace of mind because they will be better able to take care of themselves and their families.

Friends, on this Third Sunday of the Advent of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we are offered the gift of having more joy in our own lives by trusting in the God who is drawing near. And we are called upon by this same God, through John the Baptist’s proclamation, to bring more joy into the lives of our neighbors, our families, our neighborhoods, and our communities through acts of justice and compassion.

My prayer for us is that we will accept the invitation and the challenge to draw deeply from the wells of God’s love and faithfulness, that we may all know the joy our Creator means for us to have.

May this be so. Amen.