

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **Dr. Vivek Murthy was a vice admiral in the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps who served as the 19th Surgeon General of the United States, appointed by President Obama in 2014**, and since being relieved of his duties by current administration, has been on a campaign to raise awareness about what he considers to be a hugely dangerous epidemic spreading throughout our country. This condition has a larger impact on mortality than obesity or smoking. In fact it's capacity to shorten life is equivalent to that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day but Dr. Murthy believe few in the medical community are talking about it. What is this condition?...Loneliness.
1. Dr. Murthy wrote in an article this fall in Harvard Business Review about the effects of this epidemic he's been observing in all kinds of populations, from teens to seniors.
 - a) ***Over thousands of years, the value of social connection has become baked into our nervous system such that the absence of such a protective force creates a stress state in the body. Loneliness causes stress, and long-term or chronic stress leads to more frequent elevations of a key stress hormone, cortisol. It is also linked to higher levels of inflammation in the body. This in turn damages blood vessels and other tissues, increasing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, joint disease, depression, obesity, and premature death. Chronic stress can also hijack your brain's prefrontal cortex, which governs decision making, planning, emotional regulation, analysis, and abstract thinking.***
 2. In the UK in recent years, **doctors have noticed the same phenomenon and have begun putting taxpayer resources into alleviating it. Silver Line Helpline** in the UK - field calls primarily from seniors who are looking for human contact. What many of them don't mention they are feeling: loneliness.
 3. Irony of us living in a time that is supposed to be hyperconnected but loneliness is on the rise.
- B. **Third Sunday in Advent**, considering what it means for the gift of Jesus to come into this particular time and place. **Considering an area of life in Bay Area in 2017 and what one of the traditional gifts the church reflects upon in Advent brings to it.** Today we're reflecting on loneliness and what it might mean for us in a world with loneliness on the rise to receive the gift of this third Sunday, the gift of Joy.
1. **Gaudete Sunday, means "rejoice" in Latin.** Rooted in a traditional verse the is part of the liturgy for this day, Gaudete in Domino semper (Rejoice In The Lord Always). The Sunday that is traditionally connected to the promise of Joy that the Christ child is intended to bring.
 2. But what is joy as understood in the Bible? What is it meant to bring? How might we both receive it and share it? How might it transform our loneliness?
- C. **"Joy" vs. "Happiness"**
- a) Two Hebrew words that are distinct from one another:
 - (1) ashrei is "happiness"
 - (a) Psalm 1: 1-2:
 - i) ***Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
2 but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.***

- ii) primarily an individual experience

(2) simcha is “joy”

- (a) According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: Simcha in the Torah is never about individuals. It is always about something we share.
 - i) husband won't go to war when he gets married for the first year, bringing joy to his wife
 - ii) festivals rejoicing together: day of collective celebration
 - iii) ***“It is the exhilaration we feel when we merge with others. It is the redemption of solitude.”***
 - iv) Examples of this today -
 - (1) **Seeing Star Wars** on opening night. The sense of connection being together in a room with others who are excited about something. Experience it together.
 - (2) **Women's march, showing up at N. Berkeley BART and long line to get on train**
 - (3) God bringing people into Simcha, is the beauty of Advent

II. Simcha/Joy in Advent

A. Isaiah 35:8-10:

***“A thoroughfare will be there—
it will be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean will not travel on it;
it is reserved for those authorized to use it—
fools will not stray into it.
9 No lions will be there,
no ferocious wild animals will be on it—
they will not be found there.
Those delivered from bondage will travel on it,
10 those whom the Lord has ransomed will return that way.
They will enter Zion with a happy shout.
Unending joy will crown them,
happiness and joy will overwhelm them;
grief and suffering will disappear.”***

- 1. Again, Isaiah is inspiring Judah to look ahead to the picture of freedom God is bringing. He has real hope that a time of justice is coming, a time *shalom*, as we talked about last week, and a time of *simcha*.
 - 2. The image here is that the people of God will celebrate together. **Joy will sneak up on them, overtake them**, they will find themselves overwhelmed by that sense of connection to others and to God.
 - 3. The experience of Advent is a time of awaiting what is still to come, the dawn of the age in which there will be no wild beasts, there will be unending joy. We are aware that we are not fully in that age. **But we also recognize the ways that that age has begun.** The ways that God's coming in Jesus brought the gifts of advent into the world. This includes joy.
- B. Brings us to the story that this season is centered around, the Christmas story. A story that begins not with Mary or Joseph, but with an old priest living in Israel named Zechariah. Lived a common life as a priest, and husband, but also with a hole of longing in his heart. A kind of loneliness for Elizabeth was barren. No children.

1. Luke describes the situation this way:

8 Now while Zechariah was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the holy place of the Lord and burn incense. 10 Now the whole crowd of people were praying outside at the hour of the incense offering. 11 An angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar of incense, appeared to him. 12 And Zechariah, visibly shaken when he saw the angel, was seized with fear. 13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son; you will name him John. 14 Joy and gladness will come to you, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go as forerunner before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him.”

18 Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure of this? For I am an old man, and my wife is old as well.” 19 The angel answered him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 And now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will be silent, unable to speak, until the day these things take place.”

21 Now the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they began to wonder why he was delayed in the holy place. 22 When he came out, he was not able to speak to them. They realized that he had seen a vision in the holy place, because he was making signs to them and remained unable to speak.

2. The way Luke begins the story of what Jesus brought into the world is unique. He's the only writer to begin with these stories of two miraculous pregnancies.
 - a) **A pregnancy is in its very existence a communal experience.** Even a more average pregnancy is this way. There's the coming together of two human beings and the mingling of their DNA. That's an intimate, communal experience. And then there is the **conception of a human being in the body of another human being. Pregnancies are not solitary experiences.**
 - b) **These miraculous pregnancies highlight what many who have more average pregnancies acknowledge: the role of the transcendent,** the involvement not just of biological forces, but of the divine. Birth may be mundane, but for those who experience it, it is also miraculous. These stories put the involvement of God front and center.
 - c) The text tells us that **Elizabeth is very old, presumably she has been trying to conceive for the better part of her life, likely side she was a teenager.** She may be in her 50s or 60s or older at this point. Imagine 50 years of this unmet hope. 50 years of connecting with her husband in their sorrow. 50 years of carrying the grief of childlessness together. Who knows the arguments that ensued as they resented one another and wondered if things would be different if they had a different partner. You can imagine the ways they avoided speaking what they were longing for, for fear of

upsetting the other; the times the grief leaked out in painful ways as they cried at the dedication of another baby at the temple, as they cared for another niece or nephew.

- d) There's been a loneliness for Elizabeth and Zechariah, even if they've lived for decades in a loving marriage. And it is into this loneliness that a messenger from God announces something new: joy.

(1) ***"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son...Joy and gladness will come to you, and many will rejoice at his birth"***

- (2) Zechariah is afraid to hope. He is skeptical. Rejoicing is not something he is accustomed to in this arena. "How can I be sure of this? For I am an old man, and my wife is old as well." This is where you can hear the years of disappointment in his voice. He's receiving an invitation to exaltation, to celebration, to experiencing blessing even in the midst of a world still riddled with pain and heartache.

(a) Understand: **Zechariah doesn't get his youth back.** We don't get the sense that he is being granted miraculously long life. He's gonna be an old da. May not even be alive by the time the kids is an adult. They're still living as an occupied people with little rights, and so on. This isn't the moment all problems go away. There's the real concern of how anyone else is possibly going to believe he just saw an angel and his wife won't just be mad at him for poking her wounded heart where it's the most sensitive, even entertaining the idea she could still get pregnant. **His reaction is pretty understandable.**

(b) But it's a big deal to the angel. He's told because of his lack of belief, he will be kept from speaking until the birth happens. This can feel pretty punitive, maybe even petty. But I wonder if **part of what the angel is getting at is connected to this invitation to rejoice.**

(c) I wonder if perhaps the reason he loses his capacity to speak is in a sense a recognition of the challenge Zechariah is feeling to do the only appropriate thing in the circumstance he's just found himself: to rejoice. **This is a moment, this entire pregnancy is an occasion for celebration and joy.** No, all of life hasn't become perfect or trouble free, but there is unimaginable wonder and beauty, even in the midst of a life of challenge. **God has shown up in the world in a way that God hasn't been heard from for centuries.** Imagine the longing of Elizabeth and Zechariah for a child now a hundredfold. **The people of God have not received fresh revelation from God for 500 years.** Zechariah went to burn incense in the temple because that is what priests do, not because he expected God to show up. But here God was, sending Gabriel to announce not only that God was real and here and doing a new thing in their midst, but **God had seen Elizabeth and Zechariah.** God has chosen them to play a role in God's long awaited activity. This is an occasion for celebration and awe. It is beyond happiness. It is about joy.

(d) Joy is rooted in communal experience, and this is what the angel is here to communicate to Zechariah. **His life and the life of his child have communal significance. Everything about this baby is for the community:**

- i) *Joy and gladness will come to you, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord... He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go as forerunner before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to their*

children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him.

- (e) **But Zechariah doesn't see that. All he can focus on is his own story, not the bigger story it's a part of.** *I'm an old man. My wife is old.* He's too caught up in himself, and thus insecure, too lonely, too cynical, too hurt to enter the joy. And so perhaps the angel takes away his voice, because he knows that to have it do anything besides rejoice is not appropriate. And if he's not yet ready to speak words of joy, then it's better for him not to speak at all.
- 3. **Well Elizabeth does conceive**, and so, verses later, does her young cousin Mary, after she received her own divine visitor.
 - a) By the time Elizabeth learns of her cousin's pregnancy, Elizabeth has absorbed a lot.
 - (1) The experience of her husband coming home unable to speak... the strange circumstance around him losing his capacity to speak at the temple. Somehow he communicates to her what happened. And the unbelievable news that she could become pregnant with a child who is meant to be a prophet.
 - (2) And then she does. Conception takes place in her body. What are the first signs? Does she get morning sickness? Feel her body start to shift? She begins to understand that she is indeed with child.
 - (3) And then young Mary arrives at her door. Luke describes the scene this way (Luke 1:39-45):
 - (a) **39 In those days Mary got up and went hurriedly into the hill country, to a town of Judah, 40 and entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 She exclaimed with a loud voice, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child in your womb! 43 And who am I that the mother of my Lord should come and visit me? 44 For the instant the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled."**
 - (b) When Elizabeth has **her encounter with the presence of God**, come to her in the form of a pregnant virgin cousin, **she is ready**. The moment she receives Mary at her door, she feels the leaping of the child in her body, and **that leaping leads her into worship**. The picture is that the movement of this baby, who somehow senses the proximity of the child that he has been sent to make the way for, leaps, and Elizabeth is filled with God's presence, the Holy Spirit. And out of her mouth comes what? **Words of joy and blessing**. She rejoices. And she identifies it. She names that her son has just **leapt for joy** in her body. Connection has happened. Elizabeth has experienced the exhilaration of **merging with others**: with her baby, with her cousin, with her cousin's child, and ultimately with God.
- 4. Zechariah gets another chance to enter the rejoicing. His son is born, the word from Gabriel comes to pass, and 8 days later it is time to be dedicated.:
 - a) **"59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they wanted to name him Zechariah after his father. 60 But his mother replied, "No! He must be named John." 61 They said to her, "But none of your relatives bears this name." 62 So they made signs to the baby's father, inquiring what he wanted to name his son. 63 He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John."**

And they were all amazed. 64 Immediately Zechariah's mouth was opened and his tongue released, and he spoke, blessing God."

- b) Zechariah is confident that God has delivered on God's promises. The choice to name the boy as the angel instructed them affirms that. They see themselves now in this story. They know what their family is a part of. And they are ready to live into it, to celebrate it, to rejoice in it. Listen to the first words he speaks now that his voice is recovered.

(1) "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

because he has come to help and has redeemed his people.

69 For he has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,

70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from long ago,

71 that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us.

72 He has done this to show mercy to our ancestors, and to remember his holy covenant—

73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham. This oath grants

74 that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, may serve him without fear,

75 in holiness and righteousness before him for as long as we live.

76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High.

For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

77 to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

78 Because of our God's tender mercy the dawn will break upon us from on high

79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

- c) Zechariah gets it now. This story is bigger than himself. It's about what God is doing to redeem God's people and that must be celebrated with God's people.

5. **Ludwig von Beethoven is known as one of the most gifted composers the world has known.** One of his most well known works is his 9th symphony. It was initially commissioned by the Philharmonic Society of London in 1817, but he didn't finish the work until 1824. The symphony was very anticipated by the time it was ready to debut for multiple reasons. The first hearing was to a captive audience in Vienna.

- a) **The symphony required a bigger orchestra than had been used in a major symphony at that point which was one notable feature.** But the most revolutionary part of the symphony was the addition of a choral movement at the end of the symphony. This had never been done before, to add singers to the symphony. But Beethoven felt that the moment he envisioned this symphony was building too needed voices exultantly singing the words of a poem by **Friedrich Schiller called "Ode to Joy"**.
- b) Now **Beethoven had been steadily losing his hearing for years**, but it was unclear to many how advanced the loss was. He may not have been able to hear much of what he was writing through his ear, but he felt it. While he could not conduct, he insisted on

being on stage near the conductor in order to communicate the tempos and the spirit of the music.

- c) One musician playing that day described it this way: *“he stood in front of the conductor’s stand and threw himself back and forth like a madman. At one moment he stretched to his full height, at the next he crouched down to the floor. He flailed about with his hands and feet as though he wanted to play all the instruments and sing all the chorus parts.”*
- d) But **the most profound moment came at the end**. When the piece was finished the crowd erupted in thunderous applause, but with his back to them, Beethoven had no idea. Caroline Unger, the mezzo-soprano soloist, had to tap the arm and have him turn around so that he could see how the crowd’s response. Many of those in attendance, including Miss Unger, had tears in their eyes when they realized the extent of Beethoven’s deafness. But as the people experienced his masterpiece, and he experienced their rapture with it, **it was a moment of pure unadulterated joy. It didn’t bring back Beethoven’s hearing, but he could experience exultant rejoicing even in the silence.**

- 6. Isaiah looked to a day of pure joy, of perfection. And the joy that Zechariah and Elizabeth experienced and celebrated was a reminder that the day is coming, even as it has not fully come. Today we stand in the now and the not yet, the reign of God is here and it is still coming in its fullness. The joy is real and with us, even as we wait for it to be complete. And so joy in this time is not about everything being perfect. But even in the imperfection we have connection, we can have moments of merging with others, and we can get caught up together in the bigger story we’re a part of.

III. This Advent, how might we receive the gift of joy in a world marked by loneliness?

A. Recognize our deep and natural need for connection with others.

- 1. Particularly in a time and place more mobile than we’ve ever been, many of us don’t live close to family, **we may not have a natural system to connect us**. We’re implicitly told that this is not fundamental. That we simply move wherever the job opportunities are. We work whatever gigs we need to from wherever we can. We commute in our cars, we stay in our little islands, not forming deep connections with the people we circulate around. And **as Vivek Murthy has pointed out, this is killing us**.
- 2. **Goes beyond shallow social media connection. Remember the aim of Facebook isn’t actually to connect you. It’s to commoditize you**. To sell stuff to you and to sell your eyeballs and your preferences to companies. These tools can be very useful to advance connection but they can also leave us feeling isolated. We have the appearance of being known and “liked” without being fully known, cared for as we are.
- 3. **How can we invest more in connection with each other? How can we be investors in it?**
 - a) When he was Surgeon General he introduced a practice in his weekly staff meetings. For five minutes each week, one of their staff members would be invited to share some of their story from their personal life: whatever they wanted to share. It was such a small practice, but it made a huge difference about how people felt about one another and the work they were doing together.
 - b) Think about the settings you find yourself in, professionally or in places you frequent. What it would look like to pursue deeper connection with folks? Who do you know that may actually be suffering from loneliness with no-one to share joy with? What would it mean to pursue that?

B. Choose to celebrate in community, not as a denial of hardship, but an act of courage in the face of it.

1. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once wrote: **“It takes moral courage to grieve; it takes religious courage to rejoice.”** To rejoice is to declare that even in the darkness, there is still light to be experienced. There are still loving moments to be enjoyed. There are still children who make us laugh, loving touches that bring us comfort, and songs to sing that stir our souls.
2. As Rabbi Sacks says, *‘joy lives not in thoughts of tomorrow, but in the grateful acceptance and celebration of today. We are here; we are alive; we are among others who share our sense of jubilation. We are living in God’s land, enjoying His blessing, eating the produce of His earth, watered by His rain, brought to fruition under His sun, breathing the air He breathed into us, living the life He renews in us each day. And yes, we do not know what tomorrow may bring; and yes, we are surrounded by enemies; and yes, it was never the safe or easy option to be a Jew. But when we focus on the moment, allowing ourselves to dance, sing and give thanks, when we do things for their own sake not for any other reward, when we let go of our separateness and become a voice in the holy city’s choir, then there is joy.’*
3. **So we take time to feast, and drink wine together, and play games, and give gifts, and sing songs, and worship together, not because life is always perfect and easy, but because we are alive and we have one another, and Jesus is in our midst leading us into celebration.** There’s a reason he was often found at a party. He spent a lot of time when he was on earth celebrating around a table with people. And when we do that today, we experience him anew.

C. Allow God to remind you of the bigger story you are a part of.

1. We are now in the story of God’s coming. The highway to joy is being paved. We are not just little islands, we are a part of something bigger that has been going for thousands of years and that will endure after our years are spent. But while we’re here we can enter into the unfolding. And we can be a part of inviting others into the joy we’ve been included in.