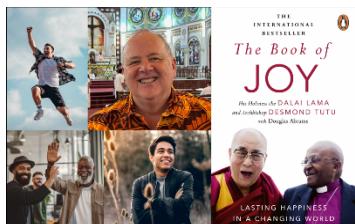




Finding Joy in a Suffering World

Isaiah 35.1-10, Song of Mary, James 5.7-10, Matthew 11.2-11

[SLIDE 1] Coloured Advent candles can be all purple, or can have a pink candle in week 3 to lighten the penitential season with a week focused on joy. There is still joy to be found, even in the midst of sorrow or suffering. Let's talk about joy.



[SLIDE 2] Do you see a common factor in these images? [...]

For just a minute, I need to talk to the men and hear from them. When I did a Google search for images of joy, there were no images of men for pages and pages. I pressed Page Down on my laptop more than a dozen times before I saw a man who wasn't named Vance Joy.

I pressed it 50 times and never got a screen with equal numbers of men and women. You can find images of men if you ask for "joyful men", but men are not presented as exemplars of joyfulness. Why do you think that is so? [...]

Here are a couple of things I did find about men and joyfulness.

The book of Ecclesiastes says, "Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labour. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God." **(Ecclesiastes 2:24)**

I found some descriptors of the joyful man on an online site. You might like to think about whether you agree or disagree. Would you add or subtract? Does this sound like the joyful woman as well as the joyful man?

His unique contributions at work, at home and in his community are valued. He sometimes likes a little adventure and excitement, and maybe even a bit of risk or danger. He wants to share life's adventures with loved ones, whether they are family or friends. He cares that his work and his values will outlive him, and future generations will be blessed because of what he's done. He wants to know that his life has eternal significance.

What do you think? [...]



[SLIDE 3]

Let's look at our Bible readings. Do we struggle with our weaknesses, our difficulties, our circumstances, our fears, our failings and limitations, the frustrations and struggles of everyday life? These things are not fixed forever. Our reading from Isaiah tells of the transforming power of God. If you would like to do a count, this passage contains over 30 'will' words, statements of what God will (or will not) do, because of the power, the nature and the intention of God. This is a strong statement of God's powerful and loving mercy.

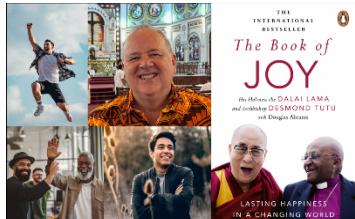
Our courage and our patience are powered by our confident trust in God. The reading from James tells us to be patient as we wait for what God will do.

The beginning of verse 7 says, *Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming.* That word *then* is translated elsewhere as *therefore*, referring us to what comes before. What comes before is an account of suffering through the cruelty, selfishness and injustice of others. This suffering is therefore the reason for needing and encouraging patience, no matter what else we may or may not do, because God will restore justice, and lives will be made joyful once more. But our joy in the spirit need not wait for that time.

Happiness is what happens to us. It depends on external factors.

Joy, on the other hand, is a choice that you make. Joy happens when you can make peace with who you are, what you have, and what circumstances you think are lacking/missing. Scripture tells us: 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control; Against such things there is no law.' (Galatians 5:22-23) Joy is a byproduct of faith in God.

Robert Masters, Chair of The Centre for Optimism, reminded us that "*the soul's joy lies in doing,*" We can hold the joy of faith in our hearts, but do we allow it to spill out into the way we live our lives?



① **[BACK TO SLIDE 2]** Victor Perton (See you pick him out as we hear his words.) is a former Victorian politician and the Founder and Chief Optimism Officer of The Centre for Optimism. Isn't that a great title? Chief Optimism Officer.

After his visit to the Church of Julian of Norwich in June of this year, he wrote, *Mother Julian's writings and beliefs are superbly optimistic. Six hundred years on, they speak to our times ... Julian's most famous and luminous affirmation "**All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well**" continues to shine as a powerful declaration of optimism. Julian's radical optimism, forged in an era of immense suffering, offers a profound framework for navigating the complex challenges of 2025. She reminds us that optimism is not denial. It is courage. And it endures.*

Did you find which man is Victor?



SLIDE 3 Victor Perton does not make this statement lightly. While my life is neither perfect nor immersed in suffering, every day, in person or at a distance, I see evidence of those whose lives are characterised by unimaginable suffering. We sometimes feel hopeless and helpless at the state of the world.

As we wait and hope and pray, our waiting need not be with idleness. Optimism may be an expression of courage, but it is also rooted in faith and trust, sufficient faith and trust to stir us to action in preparation. Like John the Baptist, we can prepare the way of the Lord.

However, we cannot make a difference in our lives, in the lives of others, or in the world if we lack belief in the possibility of making that difference.

It requires a willingness to change ourselves, to have compassion for others, and confidence in God's power and love. We need to be a new people to help bring God's new world to fruition.

This is also the engine that drives our love of our neighbour. We are created to care, and, in following Jesus, we are called to care for others. Remember the disciples in the stormy sea, and Martha in her sea of busyness, calling out to Jesus, "Don't you care?" The answer, of course, is yes, and we are also called to care.

How can we faithfully wait in hope, peace, joy and love for the coming of the Lord? John and his disciples were beginning to think that Jesus was the coming Messiah, but they were not fully sure that he was the one for whom they waited.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus gives reassurance to those who are unsure. He also tells them to look at the evidence of their own eyes and ears, and to share it. John was imprisoned and unsure about whether Jesus was the Messiah. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus directly. Jesus did not try to convince them, but instead he asked, What do you see? What do you hear? Go and tell John all about it. Jesus then spoke to the crowd. He asked them what they were seeking and assured them that what they have found is even greater. God's promises have been, and will be, fulfilled.

When we are asked how we can be sure about our faith in Jesus, we too can tell what we see, what we hear, what is happening in our lives. A difference that someone sees in us will mean more than all the wordy arguments in the world.

I am not going to ask you to share, although you can later in our sharing time if you wish, but here is a yes/no question. Is there something in your life (past, present or anticipated) that makes you feel blessed, joyful, rejoicing in the goodness of God. [...]

Mary's song tells of all that God has done for her and for past generation after generation, things that only God could do. Mary praises God's holiness, strength, justice and mercy - all that God was, and is, and will be, and all that God has done, is doing and will do. God's promises and God's actions are in perfect accord.

I believe that is enough, on this joy-focused third Sunday of Advent, to also enable us, like Mary, to rejoice in all circumstances in God's goodness and mercy, and the greatness of the Lord.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord:

my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, ...

The Almighty has done great things for me [and for us]:
and holy is his name. **Amen.**

Helen Dean

14 December 2025