

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

Guess what! There is truly a benefit to living a Christian life! No, I'm not talking about the afterlife (having never been there, I don't feel especially qualified to give you detailed travelogue...you'll have to depend, as I do, on Jesus for that). No, I'm talking about a benefit we get from Christian living right here and now, in this place, in this life. The disciples discovered it. The Apostle Paul discovered it. John the Baptist discovered it. And we can, too! A remarkable benefit. An extraordinary benefit. No, not a condo in the Caribbean. No, not a Jacuzzi in Jerusalem. No, not a Getaway in Galilee, not a resort hotel in the Holy Land, but JOY! Finding joy in your life isn't a measure of how good a Christian you are, but it is a reliable and cherished benefit that we can discover from even just trying to be like Jesus. But, let's be clear...JOY isn't quite the same thing as happiness. Happiness may be a result of JOY, but joy doesn't mean always being a happy-clappy.

Thirty-some years ago I invited my friend Gale to come to church with me. Though she had had some church experience as a child, Gale was not particularly interested in Christian doctrines and disciplines. In fact, she might have thought of herself as "spiritual, but not religious". Nonetheless, she agreed to come with me that morning. I was a little nervous, even a bit embarrassed about all the pomp and presumptive pageantry of our Episcopal service, wondering what she thought of it, and me. Would she think we were all being pretentious and silly? Would she think that we really believed what we were praying? What about all the kneeling and making the sign of the cross? Would she ask to please leave partway through the service? As we sang the offertory hymn, I dared to turn and look at her, and there were tears rolling down her cheeks, but to my surprise, they were not tears of rage, or grief, but tears of JOY. Something about the music and the message had touched her soul.

We were married in that church during the regular Sunday service at the beginning of Advent that year, and while there was certainly romance and friendship, it was a fundamental joy which inspired us to make those vows and make our relationship permanent. That joy was, I believe, a result, a benefit, of wanting to live God's dream together. God has been a partner in our marriage, has blessed us with children, has blessed us with purpose and hope and peace. Are we always happy-clappies? No, of course not, but our foundational joy is always, reliably there, thanks be to God. It has given us the courage and delight to take many adventures together, including this wonderful adventure here at St. John's. Now it happened this past summer that Gale and her high school friends celebrated their 52nd class reunion, and since Gale was on the planning committee I wound up being asked to provide the background music for their Friday night meet and greet. That was to be an outside event, on the deck of a tavern in Fulton. Gale had volunteered me because she knows how devoted I am to oldies but goodies, and that my music library is quite extensive, and for my part, I was happy and proud to have been asked. So I set to work on the project, especially happy to be included in the reunion and in this special moment in Gale's life.

And by the time I had finished, I had assembled some 12 hours of playlist, purchased a new Bluetooth speaker, and loaded all that music on my phone. We arrived early at the tavern that evening, and started setting-up. Come to find out, the establishment had an outdoor bar at one end of the deck, and they were already playing something that was intended to pass for music, and playing it loudly. Well, that was disappointing, but Gale persuaded them to accommodate us and turn the stuff off. At least for a while. I chose a corner of the deck for my speaker and started playing my songs. It was going well. That is, until others from the planning committee arrived and set up a table and some stand-up posters in front of

me, so that was hidden back in my corner. I started to move some of their display aside, but then it was pointed out to me that the display was really some kind of shrine for classmates who had passed on. Oops. So, I tried to find an alternate spot, but found that the small deck was now full of patrons, and loud ones at that. It was so crowded and noisy that I needed to crank the music up way too loud, at which point I felt the glare from those near the speaker, classmates of Gale's who didn't know me and wondered just who the heck I was and what did I think I was doing (?). And just about then the bar began playing their music again. And, darn it, I started to sulk. I just couldn't help myself. I was not happy. I was not enjoying myself. But then I saw Gale across the room, having cheerful conversations with her old friends, and I recalled the joy I have always known with her.

I had to admit that, while I was certainly captive to my own emotions, the joy I feel in my life with Christ had not abandoned me. Nor had Gale, for that matter. Knowing my sadness, she consoled me, as would each of you, I'm sure, if you had been there. You are all, we are all, representatives of the presence of God. The joyful presence of God. It is redeeming, and encouraging, not judgmental, and even in the darkest hours, the joy of God's presence begins to dawn. The sky brightens more and more as we anticipate the continual coming of Christ into our lives, and we watch the skies together, you and I, with hope and peace, and joy. We are often imprisoned by discouraging events and trials, sometimes even by our own decisions. O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. We too, are often exiled in one way or another, like the ancient Judeans who had been driven from their homes all the way to Babylon. To them, and to us, their prophet Isaiah gave this promise from God: "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." And as they gathered in that foreign and heathen land, slaves to their captors, they no doubt sang golden oldies from the Psalms, like the one we prayed together this morning: "The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; The Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked. The Lord shall reign forever, throughout all generations. Hallelujah!"

John the Baptist was imprisoned, as we heard this morning. The Apostle Paul was put in prison and probably died there. Our own St. John was taken from his congregation in Ephesus and exiled to the Island of Patmos. But they were never separated from the love of God, and that love brought them joy, even in adversity as they have testified. We may be imprisoned by many things; by addiction, by illness, by discouragement, by injustice, by unfairness, by the random chance of world events, and occasionally by the consequence of our own mistakes. But our life in Christ can assure us of JOY even in the midst of suffering, a joy which abides and perseveres alongside us forever. So, build your life on that rock. Let joy fill your homes and hearts. Let joy be your constant companion, even when you are unhappy. Radiate that deep joy to your family, friends, and neighbors, and it will become a way of life...the Christian way of life. As Isaiah told those long ago, the way of the Lord will be like a highway, "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. "

Lord Jesus, teach us the Holy Way, and through all our trials and tribulations, support our lives with foundational joy. As we live continually in the turning of the ages, in the dawning of your day, remind us of God's promise of everlasting and enduring joy. Cause our skies to brighten more and more, our hope to become more firm, our peace more resolved, and cause our joy to increase its fulfillment with each passing day. Your precious Name is on our lips and in our hearts, O Lord. Halleluiah, Amen.