

Pastor Roy's sermon from December 16, 2018 (Advent 3)

How is it that people who hold mostly the same things in their faith practice their faith in such different ways?

For some, life is good. They have enough to eat, good health, and safe, dependable housing—no major changes in their lives. Faith for these focuses on gratitude for God's goodness and mercy. Joy comes pretty naturally with gladness. The temptation when life is good is to believe that we have earned this good, comfortable life—or that it is guaranteed. . .as long as we continue to live faithfully—to keep our part of the deal. We can slip into viewing faith as a deal between God and me.

But for others, life is difficult. Perhaps the trouble begins with the loss of a job, the loss of a spouse or child, living with a difficult family member, or living with a chronic illness. Any of these can lead to the loss of a place to live. All these things are stressful. It feels like God has not kept up the bargain. They have been faithful, so why the trouble? Now, we know that faith is not a bargain. For these people, faith can come to a crisis point, just as much as the people living the good life can become bored with their faith.

We don't like a crisis, but from time to time we have to just dig deeper into our faith. We embrace the questions and we hear the voice of God speak in a fresh new way.

Whatever the questions, our faith can handle them. Unless we pretend the questions don't exist, or ignore them, or think they are a failure to believe. The failure to believe is not courageously asking questions of God, but the failure to believe is doubting whether your faith can grow into and beyond the questions which arise.

When we rest in God's grace, we have nothing to fear. Remember, faith is not about believing the right things, but about trusting in the profound and unspeakable love of God.

The maturing of our faith comes when we respond with honesty and integrity to what is arising within us. Trouble produces a deep, rooted faith as we search and long for the peace of God. Our wishes, demands, and dreams about reality fall away as we come to know love's way, love's truth, and love's life. The grace of God in the love of Jesus Christ.

So what does mature faith have to do with joy?

With faith, trouble teaches us that gracious love has no limits. Love is profound and defies understanding. Love is always a surprise. Especially from God.

Joy is our experience in faith. Joy is the response to the love of God. Joy is not happiness. Joy is a deep knowing that all is well—even when nothing feels well. Joy is not a gimmick. Joy is a faith which pegs itself on the fully reliable love of God.

Let me reread the Philippians lesson: “Rejoice in the Lord always’ again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

The one guarantee we have in our faith is a beautiful, strong, guarantee. God’s presence in love. We are reminded by our baptism that we are beloved children of God. The Love of Christ saves us. The love of God is our hope and our peace. Likewise, Holy Communion is the presence of Christ in love to us, together, period.

This is joy. Remember, though, you can be in the midst of severe depression and still know joy, because joy is not happiness bouncing around in a pretend world of getting all we want and think we need. Joy is deep, profound trust that we are held by a God who can embrace all of our trouble, even our death, and keep the promise of resurrection. From God we come. To God we return. And God is good.

May this Advent be a time of waiting, growing, and deepening faith in God’s gracious presence.

May your faith continue to grow and produce abundant joy—as painful as that is and will be. Amen.