

The Third Sunday of Advent  
Year B  
Psalm 126  
December 13, 2020

In the Name of One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have all heard the statistics. In the United States alone, there are now more people dying each day from the Coronavirus than died on September 11th or during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Since November 1st more Americans have died of the Coronavirus than died during the Vietnam War.

The numbers are staggering and unless you know someone who has died, the numbers can feel distant and impersonal as much as they feel scary and overwhelming.

There are many who are suffering physically – including some here in this congregation – and there are many who are suffering spiritually and emotionally.

As I sat with these numbers this week and the reality of the costs of this pandemic, I reflected on what others must be feeling and my own life and memories.

I grew up in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis. I was only six when it began, but by the time I had reached my twenties, I was familiar with its toll. Though at the time I didn't know gay men who had been infected, I heard of their suffering and as an open-hearted teenager aware of their stories, I ached for them.

And then I encountered the epidemic in a different way when I spent a year in South Africa working in part with orphans who had been abandoned due to HIV/AIDS having decimated their families and communities.

As I moved into my mid to late twenties the peacebuilding and justice work I did internationally often coincided with work others were doing to combat HIV/AIDS around the world. There were so much suffering and so many stories of both sadness and hope.

I am not alone in recalling these memories; I have been reading this week of others who are drawing comparisons between these two pandemics by returning to the memories, stories and grief of just a couple decades ago.

At the same time, I have been preparing this sermon for the third Sunday of Advent when we light that beautiful pink candle and are reminded to pray for - and inhabit - deep joy.

Trying to tie together grief and joy seemed to me - at first - inauthentic and trite.

But then I read the Psalm for today and rediscovered how much our faith tradition – and our ancestors in the faith – understood so well that there are actually very few instances where the two - grief and joy - are not intimately tied together.

We are reminded of past triumphs and our deliverance:

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
then were we like those who dream.  
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy.*

And we express confidence through our faith:

*Those who sowed with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.  
Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,  
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.*

Gert McMullin is known as the mother of the AIDS quilt\*\* She sewed two of the first panels to memorialize friends who had died in the early 1980s. Soon the quilt became her life.

In her role as the *Chief Quilt Production Coordinator for the NAMES Project Foundation*, she has cared for the quilt for decades – eventually moving from California to Atlanta in 2001 – along with all 48,000 panels of the quilt. She moved back to the San Francisco recently – again with all the panels – as there was to be the largest ever showing of the quilt in Golden Gate Park earlier this year (the showing was poignantly delayed due to this new pandemic).

McMullin has been sewing panels for 35 years. Her hands are said to look like a fisherman's hands – strong and rough. Though an HIV/AIDS diagnosis is now no longer a death sentence, she hasn't stopped sewing. And now she is using the leftover fabric from the HIV/AIDS quilt to sew face masks for the homeless, the frontline workers and others in need - as she faces this new crisis - and feels her way through waves of PTSD.

McMullen, whose first name used to be Cindy, not only cared for her friends who were dying – she would walk into rooms of random AIDS patients to console them and listen to them - when no one else would. Her experiences caused her to change her name. "I really loved my friends a lot," she said. "And I didn't want to be Cindy anymore, because Cindy's life was turning too painful. I knew so many people who were sick, It seemed everyone was sick. All of Cindy's friends were dying."

“The historical connection [brought so tangibly together in the new masks] is what brings tears to the eyes of local health care workers,” according to a recent article in the San Francisco Chronicle. “Excess fabric dating back to the quilt’s beginnings includes many whimsical designs found on the AIDS quilt - like flamingos, children playing, giant red lips and mustaches.

Nelson Yee, a registered Nurse in San Francisco, says his colleagues loved the first batch of masks from Mc Mullen.

They were claimed before the end of the elevator ride up to his floor.

Yee doesn’t have to do a lot of explaining to the older doctors and nurses , some of whom worked during the AIDS crisis. For the younger ones, the gift becomes a history lesson.

When you hold on to that cloth initially, there’s so much emotion, because it was serving another purpose,” Yee says. “It was serving the AIDS epidemic and now its serving this pandemic. And its helping so many people with protection.”

*Those who sowed with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.  
Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,  
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.*

McMullen’s story isn’t finished.  
In the midst of so much death,  
The joy is hard to find.

We too are still in the midst of this story – as heartbreaking as it is.  
And we are charged with finding joy and holding on to hope in the darkness.  
This is our work - this Advent and every Advent.

We do our work through the brave act of remembering.

Our joy is found in our remembering and is practiced in our worship –  
when we remember collectively the work of God in our lives –  
across generations and borders, tragedy and triumph.

How do we live as people of both memory and hope?

I stumbled upon an answer in this short reflection by Catholic theologian Karl Rahner.

How do we live as people of both memory and hope  
in this season of Advent -  
in this season of waiting for God to come to us first in the birth of our Savior  
Jesus Christ –  
and now in this season of waiting for his coming again.

How do we live as people of both memory and hope,  
brought together in worship this morning?

“Ask not, doubt not,” Rahner says.

“You have, my heart, already chosen the joy of Advent.

As a force against your own uncertainty, bravely tell yourself, ‘It is the Advent of the great God.’

Say this with faith and love,  
and then both the past of your life, which has become holy,  
and your life’s eternal, boundless future  
will draw together in the now of this world.

For then into the heart comes the one who is Advent,  
the boundless future who is already in the process of coming,  
the Lord,  
who has already come in to the time of the flesh to redeem it (Karl Rahner).”

My prayer this morning is that all of us can feel joy this morning,  
deep in our brave and fragile hearts...

that we can pray with the Psalmists (our ancestors in faith) -  
and along with our contemporary saints and angels (who live side by side with us working  
overtime, risking grief, sewing together memory and hope) -

my prayer is that all of us can feel joy this morning  
and, if we cant right now, that we trust that our tears will become shouts of joy soon enough.

For we remember always we are people of the resurrection.  
We are the people of God, the sons and daughters of God,  
beloved and treasured – one and all.

Yes, we are preparing for *Christmas*, but doing so sure in the knowledge that we are the people of *Easter*.

Because we live, we face death and grief.

But because we are Christians, we do so in the light and joy of the resurrection.

We cant escape the numbers that come to us each morning,  
telling us of the thousands who have died overnight.

And many of us cant help but think of those who are dying and the small gathering of loved ones who will celebrate their lives as they lay them to rest.

*We remember that the funeral liturgy is characterized by joy, in the certainty that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

*This joy, however, does not make human grief unchristian. The very love we have for each other in Christ brings deep sorrow when we are parted by death. Jesus himself wept at the grave of his friend. So, while we rejoice that one we love has entered into the nearer presence of our Lord, we sorrow in sympathy with those who mourn.*

And we trust that:

*Those who sowed with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.*

*Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,  
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.*

"Ask not, doubt not," Rahner says.

"You have, my heart, already chosen the joy of Advent.

As a force against your own uncertainty, bravely tell yourself, 'It is the Advent of the great God.'

Say this with faith and love,  
and then both the past of your life, which has become holy,  
and your life's eternal, boundless future  
will draw together in the now of this world.

For then into the heart comes the one who is Advent,

the boundless future who is already in the process of coming,  
the Lord,  
who has already come in to the time of the flesh to redeem it (Karl Rahner).”

Amen.

\*\* Most of Gurt’s story I quoted directly from this article: “Mother of AIDS quilt stitches familiar fabric for Coronavirus masks, San Francisco Chronicle.”