

“Your New Identity Has Been Prepared for You”

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146:5-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

The Hope, Peace, and Joy Candles are lit. This is the Third Sunday of Advent. Joy is the emphasis. As Christians, we are to experience and grow in joy. Yet, many things are happening in the world and our lives that dim our joy. Wrongs and injustices seem to carry the day.

Advent is about the incarnation. The incarnation is the historic event when God the Father made himself known as God the Son. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, was both true God and true human. The human predicament would have been hopeless if God had not descended to human in Jesus. It was impossible for human to ascend to God.

How are we to live in the interval between birth and death when there is a collision between traditional and modern understandings of sense of self and sense of worth? God has prepared your new identity before you were born. Live into what is true and prepared for you. You are a beloved child of God. Pastor and author Timothy Keller writes,

Our Culture tells us that you must look inside to discover your deepest desires and dreams and to express them. You must do this yourself, and must not rely on anyone outside to affirm and tell you who you are. A classic of this understanding can be found in Gail Sheehy’s 1970’s best seller *Passages*. There she speaks to a person who is heeding her guidance on finding authentic self: *You are moving away. . . away from institutional claims and other people’s agenda. Away from external valuations and accreditations, in search of an inner validation. You are moving out of [social] roles into the self. . . The inner custodian [i.e., conscience] must be unseated from the controls.*¹

¹Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God* (New York, New York: Viking, 2016), 124-125.

Your conscience, which Sheehy tells you to banish, is the image of God speaking to you about what is true and right. The image of God is the identity that God prepared for you. Live as a beloved child of God. Living out of the image of God is your true sense of self and sense of worth. The image of God is your new identity.

Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:5-10, James 5:7-10, and Matthew 11:2-11 describe the joy human can experience and grow in through God's restoration of one's true identity.

Isaiah 35:1-10 addresses the joy experienced through God's restoration of one's true identity. The desert blossoming, the wilderness and dry land becoming glad was God's promise that the people in exile had not been forsaken. They would once benefit from being in the Promised Land. Isaiah 35:4 reads, "Be strong, do not fear."

Psalm 146:5-10, as well, addresses the joy experienced through God's restoration of one's true identity. The people of God in grief and loss would be more than happy. They would be blessed. The Hebrew word for happy is better translated as "Blessed." Psalm 146:5-7 reads, "Happy [Blessed] are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry."

James 5:7-10, likewise, addresses the joy experienced through God's restoration of one's true identity. Patience in the midst of suffering is key to experiencing healing and joy in the midst of despair. James 5:7-8 reads, "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient."

Matthew 11:2-11 also addresses the joy experienced through God's restoration of one's true identity. The evidence that God's kingdom is coming about on earth as it is in heaven is that wrongs and injustices are righted. The blind see, the lame walk, and the poor develop a sustainable existence. Will Christians become more like John the Baptist and have the courage to speak and live what we see God doing in the world and in our lives? Matthew 11:6 reads, "Blessed [joyful] is anyone who takes no offense at me."²

New life is possible for everyone. George Santayana (1863-1952) writes, "There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval."³ The future is before us, and it compels us to live differently in the present. No matter what the circumstances of your life, the good and the bad, joy is yours to experience and grow in.

This is the Third Sunday of Advent. Advent calls you to walk in the interval between birth and death with future and present hope, peace, and joy. Be patient as God works out restoration in the world and your life. Lean into your new identity. Your new identity has been prepared for you. Go for it! Amen.

This sermon was preached (for the In-Person, Online, and Village TV 6 congregations) on Sunday, 4 December 2022 by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California

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²In all five sections of textual analysis, I have benefited from the thinking of Leanne Van Dyke, David A. Davis, Marci Auld Glass, Jin Young Choi, John M. Buchanan, Raj Nadella, and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher in *Connections, Year A, Volume 1* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 34-36, 36-38, 39-41, 42-45, 46-48 and 48-49.

³George Santayana, "War Shrines," *Soliloquies in England and later Soliloquies*, 1922.