

I can see it coming. I can feel the wave of expectation already. Starting this Friday, the world is going to expect me to be joyful. Or if not joyful, then at least jolly, which is like joy's superficial, immature, and overly-caffeinated cousin. (Jolly is joyful-lite.) Starting this Friday -- Black Friday, not to be confused with Good Friday -- starting this Friday, with the "official start of the holiday season," the wider culture will expect me to be joyful.

And to be honest, church... I've been having trouble summoning it this year. I've been having trouble summoning the joy.

I can fake it, I suppose. I can sing "Holly Jolly Christmas" with Burl Ives. I can put the smiling family photo on the Christmas card (or at least Photoshop it so that we *look* like a smiling family on the Christmas card). I can drape tinsel on anything that'll stand still long enough. I can dig out the gaudy Christmas sweater and the Rudolph earrings that flash with twinkle lights. I can bedeck myself and my life in the trappings of jolliness and joy.

But I'm having trouble feeling it. I'll admit: nearly eleven months ago, as New Year's approached, I was practically giddy at the thought of leaving 2020 behind. What could be worse than that dumpster fire of a year, right?

And then 2021 was like: *challenge accepted!* See, what I'm hearing from so many people -- friends, family, colleagues, even many of you -- is that 2021 has been an even harder year than 2020. COVID-tide has served up all kinds of new challenges while simultaneously wearing us further down... and the trouble is, we just have less reserves to draw upon than we did way back at the beginning of the pandemic. That has led to so many of us feeling frustrated, angry, tired, fearful, or just altogether burnt out. And

church, that's not just what I'm hearing. A lot of times, that's what I've been feeling, too.

But what, now I'm supposed to be joyful? Come Friday, come the "most wonderful time of the year," I'm supposed to flip the switch and summon the joy? How am I supposed to do that? How are we supposed to do that? How are we supposed to get from here to joy?

Wouldn't you know, church? I think that maybe, just maybe, the Bible can help us out with that. Specifically, maybe Psalm 100 -- the scripture we read earlier today -- can help us out with that.

Psalm 100 is in the running for "best known" and "most spoken/sung" of all the psalms.<sup>1</sup> It's a go-to psalm. Need a call to worship? Go to Psalm 100. Need a feel-good devotional? Go to Psalm 100. Need a scripture to open to in a display Bible? Go to Psalm 100. (Seriously, come up and check. It's Psalm 100.) Psalm 100 is like the little black dress of scriptures; it works for all occasions.

It particularly works for today -- for Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the church year, the Sunday that celebrates Christ's rule and reign, his authority over all of creation. Psalm 100 speaks to the themes of Christ the King. This is a psalm that invokes God's greatness and God's goodness, God's authority and power, in a way that almost demands an all-earth, all-cosmos kind of praise.<sup>2</sup> In the central verse, the very keystone verse of the psalm, it reminds us that God made us, and we belong to God.<sup>3</sup> That makes it a great supplementary scripture for Christ the King Sunday.

But that's not why I picked it. Frankly, I was banking on none of you

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<sup>1</sup> NIB 1079

<sup>2</sup> NIB 1078

<sup>3</sup> NIB 1078

remembering that today is Christ the King Sunday. I didn't pick this psalm because today is Christ the King Sunday. I picked it because today is the Sunday before Advent, the Sunday before the start of the "holiday season" (with all its expectations of jolliness and joy), the Sunday before Thanksgiving (with all its focus on gratitude). I picked this psalm because it brings together themes of gratitude and joy.

Gratitude and joy. A few months ago, I was on the phone, whining to a friend and colleague about the utter joylessness of 2021. She responded: "You know what the root for joy is, right? Where joy starts?"

"No," I replied, momentarily annoyed with her for trying to be helpful and constructive instead of just agreeing with me and sulking with me.

"Gratitude," she said. "There's a lot of good work out there linking gratitude to joy." *There's a lot of good work out there linking gratitude to joy.* Those words planted a seed in me.

She's right, by the way. There's a lot of good work out there linking gratitude to joy. Brené Brown -- professor, celebrated author, and researcher in the field of social work -- writes of this insight from her own research:

The relationship between joy and gratitude was one of the important things I found in my research. I wasn't expecting it. In my 12 years of research on 11,000 pieces of data, I did not interview one person who had described themselves as joyful, who also did not actively practice gratitude.

For me it was very counterintuitive because I went into the research thinking that the relationship between joy and gratitude was: if you are joyful, you should be grateful. But it wasn't that way at all.

Instead, practicing gratitude invites joy into our lives.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Brené Brown, <https://globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/brene-brown-on-joy-and-gratitude/>

Similarly, Brother David Steindl-Rast -- author, lecturer, Benedictine monk, and 95-year-old TED Talk sensation -- writes:

The root of joy is gratefulness. We tend to misunderstand the link between joy and gratefulness. We notice that joyful people are grateful and suppose that they are grateful for their joy. But the reverse is true: their joy springs from gratefulness. If one has all the good luck in the world, but takes it for granted, it will not give one joy. Yet even bad luck will give joy to those who manage to be grateful for it. We hold the key to lasting happiness in our own hands. For it is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.<sup>5</sup>

And for what it's worth, these modern-day guides aren't saying anything new here. They're saying something old, something ancient, something as ancient as Psalm 100.

"Make a joyful noise to the LORD," Psalm 100 begins (Psalm 100:1, NRSV). And church, between you and me (and the internet)... when I re-read those words a few weeks ago, I almost groaned (which preachers aren't supposed to do when they read the Bible). I almost groaned -- *great, one more person expecting me to be joyful*. But as I re-read, and kept reading, and read these ancient words with those reflections from Brené Brown and David Steindl-Rast in my mind... as I read, Psalm 100 began to seem less like an unreasonable demand and more like an invitation, like a map. It's almost like Psalm 100 is working backwards: first calling us to joy, and then revealing how we can arrive at joy.

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<sup>5</sup> David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1984).

See, after the psalmist calls us to “make a joyful noise to the LORD,” the psalmist also calls us to “enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise,” to “give thanks to him [and] bless his name” (Psalm 100:4, NRSV). *Enter his gates with thanksgiving*. Maybe we arrive at joy because we first enter God’s gates with thanksgiving, with gratitude, with gratefulness.

This week, I imagine you have some kind of practice, some kind of tradition of thanksgiving and gratitude and gratefulness. Perhaps you’ll gather with loved ones around a table, and as you enjoy the turkey and the stuffing and the pumpkin pie, you’ll pause to go around the table and share what you’re thankful for. Every year we do that for a day (or for part of a day, really... gotta get to the Black Friday preview sale, after all). And then we rush headlong into the hustle and bustle of the holly-jolly holiday season.

A day. We give gratitude a day (or part of a day). No wonder we feel like this.

But what if we made the practice of gratitude a more intentional and regular part of our lives? The practice of gratitude? Not just the feeling, but the practice? Brené Brown continues: “When I say practice gratitude, don’t mean ‘the-attitude-of-gratitude’ or feeling grateful, I mean *practicing gratitude*. These folks [the ones who described themselves as joyful] shared in common a tangible gratitude practice.”<sup>6</sup> Keeping a gratitude journal. Setting aside a specific time each day -- with an alarm as a reminder -- to reflect on gratitude. In her own family, Brown began to start each meal -- not just the Thanksgiving feast -- by having each person share what they’re grateful for. David Steindl-Rast began putting post-it notes on his most overlooked blessings -- the clean water from the tap, for example -- to remind him to be grateful.

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<sup>6</sup> Brené Brown, <https://globalleadership.org/articles/leading-yourself/brene-brown-on-joy-and-gratitude/>

My own friend -- the one who was annoying and wouldn't let me sulk, who was annoying but right -- gave me a good suggestion for a gratitude practice. When I told her I was preparing this sermon, she said: "I use this app on my phone called 'Presently.' It prompts reflections on gratitude. As you get ready to write your sermon, you might want to try it for your own soul work."

"Oh, you misunderstand," I replied. "I'm fine being cranky and cynical. I don't want to do any of my own soul work. I just want to tell all the people in my church what to do."

And she sighed, and replied: "Honey. Yeah, do your own soul work." (Church, you need to find a friend like her.) In the end, I didn't use her suggestion of the Presently app, but that's just because it's only available for Android. I downloaded an app called Grateful on my iPhone, and then set an alarm to remind me to use it.

Church, there are a lot of ways to practice gratitude. So I want to challenge you: starting this week, perhaps starting this Thanksgiving, but not *ending* with this Thanksgiving... establish some daily gratitude practice that you sustain all the way into 2022. Be intentional about it. Take the words of Psalm 100 to heart. Enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and enter them every day, in some way that works for you.

I'm going to try it out with you. I can't guarantee the results. But maybe... just maybe... maybe we'll find that when we enter God's gates with thanksgiving and gratitude, we don't just enter God's gates. We find the very gateway that leads to holy joy.