

## In Pursuit of...

In pursuit of...it seems as if most of our world is constantly in pursuit of something. One of the foundational documents of our nation seems to lift up this concept of pursuit as being something we should be doing...specifically that among our basic rights is that of the pursuit of happiness. The dictionary definition of happiness is that it is a sense of well-being or contentment that usually is associated by people with those times when they feel successful, safe or lucky. This definition means that the emotion of happiness is associated with things external to oneself, which makes the connection to them being something to be pursued reasonable. This is followed in the dictionary by the comment that people usually want to do more of those things which produce those feelings. That is again very logical. It is obvious that our society has definitely embraced this pursuit of happiness whole-heartedly...most seek to find it by defining it through achieving success as measured by status, by wealth or by possessions. These are then set as goals for lives and whether or not they are obtained the measure of a degree of happiness. The achievement of those things also usually, but not always will bring safety which was a part of the definition. Often those who achieve these things will reflect on the way that they got there and will also feel lucky. However, often many people will find in their pursuit of these things...although their ultimate goal was happiness...that goal of happiness was not actually achieved. They become successful, have status or wealth, but are not truly happy. The candle we lit today was not called happiness but was named the candle of joy...and those words, although often used as if they were interchangeable, really are not. Happiness is indeed pursued by many people in the culture around us, often quite frantically. The problem with pursuing happiness is that achieving it is found in the accumulations of things external. Joy on the other hand comes from an internal spring, a fountain or resource that dwells within. Persons who have joy in their life may be well-off financially, but they may also only be getting by. The definition of joy is simpler; it is the feeling of well-being. It does not rely on externals, it is found internally. Perhaps that is why it is found on our journey in Advent...the themes of Advent are hope found in the midst of darkness while waiting for God's promise, peace found within through the presence of the Lord, and now joy because while waiting for the Lord's return in glory we have been given signs of hope and the peace found in the knowledge of God's presence among us, even in the midst of our brokenness and darkness. If we look to our scriptures, we find two frequent messages given to encourage us related to God's promise that we are not alone: one is that we are not to be afraid and the other is that we are to rejoice always. Advents highlights the themes underlying these messages; messages that remind us that what we are meant to pursue is something other than just happiness, we are to pursue our connection to our Lord. In thinking about the passages before us today and the theme of joy presented by the Advent Wreath, it occurred to me that often the things in life which bring us joy are not the ones that we choose

to pursue, but the ones which find us when we are not thinking of ourselves. Actually neither happiness nor joy are mentioned in today's texts, but they have a common theme. That theme clearly in both texts is one of being sent on a mission, of having a purpose outside of oneself. Isaiah 61:1—"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn." Isaiah has been called upon to bring a word of hope to the people of God who are living in exile. This word he brought to them has become part of the word brought to us as well through the tradition known to Jesus and to the earliest of those who followed him. It was how Jesus announced in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth his purpose when he read those words from the Isaiah scroll. Our second text comes from the gospel of John and tells us the story of that strange wild man who spent his time in the Judean wilderness calling people to repent because the kingdom of God was at hand. Many came to hear him and became his disciples, thinking that he was either the returned prophet Elijah or the promised Messiah. Yet John knew he was neither. He recognized that he like Isaiah had been anointed by God for a purpose and that purpose was to be the herald who called attention to the coming of the promised one. He was to call people to repent and to testify to the identity of Jesus. As we look at these texts, it is clear that neither of them involve their choosing their particular mission. What they chose to do was to accept what God called them to do. There are many narratives listed in our scriptures which are listed as call stories, stories that are used to talk about vocations, about how God calls people to specific tasks. These are not usually listed among those. Yet clearly, both of these narratives state that they are relating instances where God has anointed or sent an individual to carry out an important purpose...and they answered the call. Neither of these texts tells us anything about the emotions or feelings of those who answered these calls, just the nature of the calls and the choice they made to accept. If we look at the things God asked of them, the purposes God had for them to accomplish, we might find that they are very familiar to the things that Jesus has asked of those he calls as his disciples as he too sends them out to carry good news to the world promising to be with them as they go. For Jesus, the good news was that the kingdom or reign of God was near and possible on earth; he was there to proclaim how it was to come and be present here. Jesus did not envision God's reign as in a distant place or in a far off time, but that it was near through people repenting and living according to the ways he taught them about the kingdom. Unfortunately, humanity cannot seem to universally completely manage to arrive at that state. For that reason, Jesus completed his mission by making that journey to the cross outside the gates of Jerusalem. Yet we are still called and sent to proclaim the news he brought. That is our mission as his disciples: to bring the reign of God closer to this time and place. We are to see his face in those around us and respond to them so that when that day comes and he returns we can be among those to whom he will say that when we saw him

hungry, we gave him food, when he was thirsty, we gave him something to drink, when he was a stranger, we welcomed him. What we are called to do is to offer love to others in whatever way that we can, because he loves them. Have you ever noticed that when you do something like that, when you offer something to someone else...that you get this strange sense of satisfaction...perhaps you might even say joy from it? That often when you set out to pursue something that you think will make you happy, even when you achieve it, you aren't satisfied with it? That it isn't nearly as shiny, or as fulfilling as you thought it would be, yet that something that you did for someone else...even though it might have cost you time, or disrupted your plans...gave you a sense of pleasure that was unexpected. On this Advent journey we are contemplating the amazing gift that God has given us, the gift of coming to dwell among us to reveal the depth of love and grace that is available to and for us. This journey calls us to talk about the hope we have through God even in the midst of darkness, the peace we have through God's presence with us and not the joy that is available to us, also through the answering of God's call on our lives. God knows when we answer the call to love one another in response to the love that God has poured out upon us, we will truly find that joy springing up within and filling our hearts. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.