

3 Advent 2020

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

We are in the midst of another Christmas Season, and many people are very determined that it will still be Christmas as it always has been for them. Parties will still happen, extended-family dinners will take place, Christmas pageants will be held, despite recommendations and current restrictions. Granted, gathering restrictions differ from State to State. But honestly, those restrictions may or may not be heeded and some will do whatever makes them happy.

There are those who feel that any restrictions especially during the holiday season are an infringement on their personal freedoms. Interestingly, there is often no mention of how their decisions may affect anyone else.

I want to share part of an article written by KAKI OKUMURA. Entitled: **Pandemic Lessons from Japan: A Tradition of Considering Others.**

“I was in Japan during the Fukushima disaster, and I remember that day like an American remembers 9/11”. (For those who might not know, this was a nuclear accident, that occurred in 2011 at the Fukushima Daiichi (‘Number One’) nuclear power plant on the Pacific coast of northern Japan, which was caused by a severe earthquake and powerful series of tsunami waves. It was the second worst nuclear power accident in history).

She continues: “It was shocking and devastating, and it challenged my understanding of stability and safety. School was temporarily canceled, my friends left Japan, I wasn’t

supposed to leave the house for fear of radiation poisoning, and in general there was an air of paranoia and fear.

During this crisis, I first learned of the (自肅). Jishuku is loosely defined as the practice of restraining from fun, luxury, and celebration in consideration of others who are going through a hard time. Then-Prime Minister Abe encouraged citizens to practice jishuku, to show camaraderie and support for those directly affected by the earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima disaster. Not just victims, but to show support for heroes as well—while volunteers and workers were going out of their way to rebuild homes and clean up radioactive waste, those who couldn't directly help should at least show support by restraining from going out.

March is the time for cherry blossom festivals and celebrations, and April is the time for graduation ceremonies, but in the name of jishuku many of these major events were canceled. Shopping malls were sparse, if not completely closed, and city lights were turned off in the name of saving electricity and nightlife slowed down.

It was not forever. Eventually schools reopened, events resumed, and the economy did not collapse. But I'll forever remember how on a national level, so many people could come together for a moment to show support. There was fear and uncertainty, yes, but it didn't turn Japanese society against each other—the rich did not host lavish parties, and the reckless did not go on looting sprees to capitalize on others' misfortune. Staying at home and keeping quiet wasn't oppression of freedom, but a personal choice in consideration of others." (end quote)

Whether or not it had anything to do with Jishuku, Ms. OKUMURA does point out that the total COVID-19 deaths per million, in Japan, stands at 13.56. By comparison, the U.S. has a total death rate of 685.69 per million residents.

I realize that these are both very different cultures and one may not agree with making these comparisons between our country and Japan. And I also would have to agree that it would be a mistake to think that every Japanese citizen supports the practice of jishuku.

Nonetheless, Jishuku does appear to promote behaviors that a Christian might emulate.

Suppressing happiness and joy is not the point, unless participating in social activities are the **only** thing that brings one joy. Paul tells us to rejoice always, even in the face of adversity. Psalm 126, which we read this morning, is full of joy. Whatever the type of captivity being referred to, whether it was the return of the captives from Babylon back to Jerusalem or some other calamity, the people reacted with great exuberance and laughter.

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, *
then were we like those who dream.

2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *
and our tongue with shouts of joy.”

Dreams, unlike nightmares, are filled with hope. Unless you count hoping that your nightmares don't come true. Their dreams being realized, the Jews responded to God's goodness with joy and gladness.

Captivity and sorrow were replaced **with dancing**. God had come through for them as promised.

There is no doubt that we find ourselves in a current situation that we do not find pleasant and is not of our own choosing. Nobody hoped for a pandemic. It is stressful,

fearful. and anxiety producing. Many are tired and losing hope. We dream of returning to normalcy, but do not know what we are returning to. The Jewish people, returning from Babylon, were returning to a new normal for them. Most had never known the Jerusalem that was left behind. They did not know what they were coming back to but were joyful because they were free from captivity and coming home.

When I consider the readings, what comes to my mind is that some of us look at the pandemic as a temporary captivity of sorts which definitely restricts our normal lives as we knew them. We are isolated from what was normal for us. Others see their captivity, not so much due to the Virus itself, but instead by the government and its imposed restrictions on their previous normality. They feel that their happiness, or lack thereof, is not in their control. If they could simply return to normal, they would reclaim their joy. The problem with this is that we cannot return to the way things were, especially not as Christians. For Christians, the dream is everything. Hope is everything. Not that life will return to normal, but that God is and always has been in control. That we, above everything else, have others to care for, whose lives are more important than ours. This may cause some discomfort for us.

Part of the issues for us as well as for society, is how we define happiness and joy. Psalm 126 mentions joy four times but happiness zero. Many people consider these to be synonymous, but I don't think so. Being joyful does not feel the same as being happy to me.

Lifestyle mentor Rachel Fearnley says this:

“Joy and happiness are wonderful feelings to experience but are very different. Joy is more consistent and is cultivated internally. It comes when you make peace with who

you are, why you are and how you are, whereas happiness tends to be externally triggered and is based on other people, things, places, thoughts and events". (end quote)

So, although the Pandemic, racial and social injustice, discrimination, isolation, and poverty, can directly influence one's happiness; joy finds an internal source of development. For Christians, joy finds its source in the person of Jesus. We often get so wrapped up in what events happening around and to us, we forget that.

Jeremiah 31:13 says, "I will turn their mourning into gladness; / I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow."

Even though many feel that joy, gladness, and happiness are equal in the Bible, I believe that joy comes from the heart. Will we be happy if we have that joy? Yes! Can we find happiness without the joy of God in our hearts? People do it all the time. But it doesn't last.

Happiness without God doesn't take root. So, during this Advent of 2020, how do we refocus on Jesus as we await celebrating his birth as well as his return?

I found these suggestions in Crosswalk which I really liked.

1. Seek Out Quiet Moments. Meditation is difficult for a lot of people. Try sitting in quiet or listening to Hymns
2. Make Time for Your Bible. Even for a few minutes a day
3. Ask for Jesus' advice. We don't do this enough. Ask Jesus to help with decisions throughout the day.
4. Volunteer. One of my favorites. Helping others takes the focus off us and onto God.

5. Pray. Seems obvious. Pray for others especially in this time of Pandemic.
6. Spend Time with Your Loved Ones. Not always possible in person but via the phone or email.
7. Celebrate Advent. Again, seems obvious since we are celebrating the 3rd Sunday of Advent. We are 11 days before the celebration of Christmas, and the nearness of the feast is reason for great joy.
8. Say No! Carve out time for Jesus in your schedule.

There are a plethora of suggestions that you can find on the internet.

So, on Joy Sunday, let's not get hung up on whether the gladness in our hearts is joy or happiness. Christmas is right around the corner. Even in a secular world, this can be a beautiful time.

But for believers, something else besides bright lights, rum balls, fruitcake and mulled wine is going on now.

We are about to welcome the eternal God of the universe into our temporal and tangible world. This is huge. Soon, we will again hear these words: "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:10-11)".

Joy. Great joy. For all people. For everyone, everywhere.

That is something to be joyful about!

Amen!!