

3rd Sunday in Advent

Cycle C-2024

At one time in my life, I regularly enjoyed the music of the country singer, John Anderson. I have not listened to him in a long time. I recently came across his song, "I've Got It Made." It was like walking down memory lane, as it was a memorable part of my young adult years. The refrain of the song is: "But I've got the morning sun, I've got the evening breeze. I got the woman that I love lyin' close to me. I've got a few good friends and the bills are paid. I got the moon and stars above and I've got it made."

As we celebrate Rejoice Sunday, I believe John Anderson's refrain has almost all the ingredients of a life of joy. The refrain makes reference to "the morning sun," "the evening breeze," and "the moon and the stars above." This reminds us that we can experience joy by immersing ourselves in nature. There is something deeply spiritual and therapeutic about being outside and: seeing the variety and vitality of creation; feeling the

touch of heat, cold, and wind on our skin; hearing the birds chirp; smelling the exquisite fragrance of flowers and plants; and tasting the delicious food which comes forth from the earth. In the most subtle yet profound way, it raises our minds and hearts to God. With a spirit of awe and wonder, we celebrate the wisdom, beauty, and grandeur of God.

One of the most spiritual experiences I had with nature involved being on a mountain range in the Grand Tetons during sunset. In that quiet and sacred moment, I had a subtle but soul stirring awareness of God's existence and loving presence. As we rejoice in God's original Cathedral, we also grow in our awareness that we are part of a greater "chain of being," that includes all of creation. We are both humbled and filled with an exhilaration that brings us a quiet joy. I invite you to regularly experience the unique joy that nature provides. It's truly healing and renewing for the soul. I know it can be quite a challenge in the heat and humidity of North Louisiana. May we do the best we can under the circumstances. Our efforts will be worth it on a personal and spiritual level.

The refrain also makes reference to "I've got the woman that I love lyin' next to me" and "I got a few good friends." This reminds us of the joy we can experience through loving and life-giving relationships. One reason we experience joy is because we encounter the divine every time we look upon and interact with others. After all, we are all "made in the image and likeness of God." The Divine DNA dwells within everyone.

The second reason we experience joy is because God is a Trinity, or community of persons. Therefore, God is inherently relational. Since we are made in His image and likeness, we are inherently relational to varying degrees. We tend to feel more alive whenever we are connecting with and serving other people, whether it be on a casual or deep level, or on a personal or professional level. This elevated sense of joy fills our hearts to overflowing. Relationships are truly nourishment and a healing tonic for the soul. Whether we are an introvert or extravert, we are always more joyful with them than without them.

Finally, the refrain states "and my bills are paid." This reminds us that we can experience joy without an

overabundance of wealth and material things. All we need is enough to adequately and comfortably provide for ourselves and our families, with preferably some surplus. John Anderson says it best when he sings: “I don’t need a gold mine or a long limousine. I’m not the kind of man to surrender my soul to material things. Just give me a cane pole, and a shady spot to sit. To me that’s about as close to heaven as a man can get.”

Recent empirical studies indicate that it is experiences, both individual and shared, and not things, that feed our souls and brings joy in our lives. May this inspire us to create, or follow through on, a “bucket list” of all kinds of experiences that can substantially expand our souls and nurture the deepest desires of our hearts. It is the simple pleasures of life that touch and transform us in the most delightful manner.

The joy that nature, relationships, and the simple pleasures brings into our lives is powerfully illustrated in the comedy, “Grown Ups.” Five childhood friends are reunited after the death of their beloved basketball coach. They brought along their wives and children for the funeral, which was followed by a big reunion at a lake

house. In the beginning, there were macho attempts to boast or even lie about their success in life. After the initial bravado, they gradually let down their guards and became real and honest with each other, about the good, bad, and the ugly of their lives. It was pure magic to see how their joy grew as they renewed their bond of friendship and brotherhood by: re-telling stories from their past, sharing jokes and laughter; pulling pranks and picking on one another; discussing their biggest struggles and problems; and creating new experiences together in the present moment.

Many of their bonding experiences involved being outside in nature, either as a “band of brothers” or with their wives and children. They even forced their children to get away from their tv’s, phones, video games, and from staying inside all the time. Gradually, the children began to interact with each other and went beyond their more individualistic approach to life. They learned that friendship and the simple pleasures of nature brought them a wealth of joy that technology and material things could not provide. It was beautiful to see how everyone

left the reunion with a significant increase of joy in their hearts and lives.

As much joy as nature, relationships, and simple pleasures of life can bring us, our joy will be incomplete and fleeting, if we are not grounded in the One who is our Ultimate Joy. As Christians, we believe that is Jesus Christ. That is why at Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Brother and Savior, we sing with full voice, whether we have a good voice or not: “Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her King. Let every heart, prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing.”

Jesus revealed that it is in Him, and through fidelity to His Word, “that our joy will be complete and everlasting.”

With Jesus as our Ultimate Joy, we will experience all the authentic joys of this world, and the world to come, with the highest level of awe and wonder, pleasure, and gratitude. In every sense of the word, we will be able to proclaim, “I’ve got it made,” because in Christ, our joy will be complete.