

# Is Joy to be Taken for Granted?

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## Is Joy to be Taken for Granted? A Reflection during Advent

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by the Rev. Dr. Marta Illueca

Recently, during worship for the start of the Advent season, I felt imbued by a plethora of images that triggered this present reflection. In Advent, we join Christians from all over the world and through the centuries, in their sense of anticipation for the coming of Christ. And so, we do await as well, and we cling to that hope and expectation for joy beyond description. That joy, however, seems like a utopia in a world clouded by chaotic confusion, violence, and societal aloofness. My advent reflection starts with words from our Savior, in his farewell discourse for his beloved disciples:

*“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”* Jn. 15:11

It's almost as if Jesus, in his wisdom, hints at the premise that joy *per se* is not the complete human experience. If the capacity for joy is inherent to human nature, the reality is that this is not necessarily a trait that is permanent or always functional. As Christians, we believe it is our god given birthright to embrace our innate capacity to love, praise, and rejoice in the surrounding gifts of creation and the promise of Christ's return. But these ideas clash with the fragile framework of our humanity and the current state of global distress that surrounds our society.

The glory of Christ, the joy sung by the angels at his birth and the promise of his second coming sometimes seem like the mirage of a spiritual oasis that we long for, in the middle of the desert of our human existence. Inherent in our humanity is the capacity to express emotions, including joy. But we are not immune to the world's violence and aggression. Our nation is chronically participating in war-related conflict, and we do not have the power to protect our brethren, their families, and others that get caught in the middle of armed conflicts.

We are living in troubled times, colored by unprecedented levels of discrimination and violence. And, I cannot help but seek a more balanced equation thinking of all the emotional collateral damage from the trepidation of current times. On one hand, our default sense of compassion naturally flows to the victims upon whom befalls the rising and widespread cruelty in our own nation. In contrast, let us not forget the question of how that level of violence and socio-cultural intolerance affects both perpetrators and witnesses. A

consequence of inflicting suffering upon others, wittingly or unwittingly, is the poorly understood and recently characterized scourge that affects a significant group in our society, and that is what modern psychology refers to as “moral injury”. The latter results from a conflict between an individual’s moral compass and their actions or the actions they witness.

Moral injury is an emergent concept, described as a syndrome which robs its victims from the ability to make meaning and the capacity for joy. In the words of a former war veteran:

*“There is much to be learned about moral injury... But there is one thing I am certain about, it is that in committing great wrongs against others, I committed great wrongs against myself as well.”* (from Brock & Lettini’s *“Soul repair: Recovering from moral injury after war,”* 2012)

At the heart of moral injury is the loss of moral agency, and in the process there is the loss of meaning in life. As new knowledge emerges regarding the recognition and management of moral injury as originally described in war veterans and later in other scenarios, the need for specialized pastoral interventions has greatly increased and it is becoming an important complement in the treatment of conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

### **So how can we reconcile our society’s existential turmoil with our Christian hope for complete joy?**

As Christians, we rely in the revealed word of God and the moral teachings of Jesus who promised us hope for complete joy:

*“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”* (Jn. 16:24)

As humans, we hang on to the hope of a bright future, where peace and Christian fellowship prevails and where wars become a thing of the past. If moral injury proves to be what researchers are reporting to us, then we have in our hands a reality that is deeply disturbing. Somewhere in my city, in your neighborhood, in many corners of this nation, many are struggling with a unique kind of suffering colored by their loss of meaning-making and craving for our empathy and support.

And for those of us who must watch from a distance, there remains the question of: how do we find hope in the belief that God’s goodness, as originally portrayed in creation, will prevail? When God created the world and humanity, he “saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). We could say that God rejoiced in his creation and we, as the *imago dei* are the living organs of the divine creative will.

After the fall of Adam and Eve, pain and suffering, crime and punishment entered a world originally created out of love, “when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (Job 38:4,7). In our heart, we believe in a loving God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). And through Jesus Christ, we find hope in

eternal life. As children of God, we strive for a way of life that follows a dutiful code of conduct and that looks ahead with hope for the day when God “will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:4).

Jesus teaches us how to make our joy wholesome, by abiding in his love and following his commands, which center around the love of neighbor as self. When we follow the Christian way of life, we can rejoice in the goodness of creation and express compassion and empathy toward the less fortunate human beings whose capacity for joy is thwarted by life traumas. Pain and suffering are a reality of this life, yet God’s love and goodness are infinite and wholesome. I believe that the answer to finding hope and to fully rejoice in the goodness of creation can also be found deep in the life and teachings of Jesus.

It is my hope that more research and academic inquiry is done into the nature of joy and happiness, and that new approaches to the study of the human psyche will contribute to craft a hopeful and ethically sound future for our younger generations.

# A Personal Reflection of Faith

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by Scott Serota

I could start this article by questioning faith. I could start by posing the question of what faith is or means for all of us. The fact is that while each of us may continually question faith through our journey with Christ, we probably find no easy or universal answer. Faith means something different for every person who dares to take that step or that leap into it. It may be easier for some of us, but I find myself questioning whether it *should* be easy.

Faith is often viewed as absolute, concrete, and unshakable. However, that is not how it truly works in my experience. It is a world away from absolutes and far from a steadfast belief that is unquestionable. Faith shifts and questions arise, and they should both be seen as essential. A *faith journey* is one that each of us walks on our own with Christ. The Bible shows numerous instances in which this tandem journey is a relationship. As with any relationship, it takes work, and it is not always easy. It demonstrates moments that run the full emotional spectrum — those that are easy and those that are difficult because it is a personal experience that informs us and defines this relationship.

This does not mean that we must go it alone. Yes, there should be comfort in scripture and in the steadfastness of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Likewise, though, we also have spiritual leaders to shepherd us. We have a congregation that is there to support us as well. This is why the congregation renews its own baptismal covenant at every baptism and assuredly reinforces their commitment to help the candidate, much like a family united by faith in their shared commitment and connection.

I am deeply committed and deeply connected to my church and church family. I have become increasingly involved through various ministries, and each one fills me with joy, a sense of purpose, and satisfaction to show up for others.

On Fridays, I go online and lead the services of Evening Prayer and Compline for my parish and others who might be listening. It grounds me and connects me to everyone and everything as it unites us all for a brief amount of time in the chaos of the day. Being able to say those same prayers each week that have sustained us all gives me much comfort. They force me to be present, think about, and reflect upon the words spoken and the prayers offered. I am grateful to be able to speak each name and cause when I offer prayers and intercessions.

I once had a dean who decided to have a group study on The Lord's Prayer. I was the lone person who showed up. Although we touched on the prayer's content, we focused on how saying the same words each time we say this prayer allow us to reflect, think and feel deeply

about what we are truly saying and believing.

In my teenage years, as with many I'd imagine, sleeping late on Sunday held more allure than waking early for church. However, what made me leave the church was seeing people I knew and felt a familial connection with in the congregation simply saying this prayer by rote and without emotion. It was difficult to realize that some in the congregation attended out of habit rather than out of a connection to faith.

The parish I attend has a greeting that is recited before each service:

*No matter where you come from or where you are going,  
No matter what you believe or what you doubt,  
No matter what you feel or just don't feel today,  
No matter whom you love,  
You are welcome into this space  
To be met by God  
Who knows you by name,  
Who knows your heart,  
Who knows your mind,  
And wants to have a relationship with you.*

Now that I am deeper in my faith journey this greeting has greater significance than it would have had when I was a sleepy teenager. There are days when you believe and other days when you are full of doubt; days when you feel connected and some days when you don't feel that connection. Beyond that, a deeper understanding can come with leaning into faith that God is ever-present in everyone and everything. There is a comfort in purpose and a joyfulness in possibility. There are dark days and there is the promise of a new day filled with opportunity and hope, even when it seems to be waning within us and draining from the world we see.

Matthew 18:20 says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Christ dwells within each of us and thus is ever-present. This presence allows each interaction to be holy and for Christ to be brought out into the world to others.

Take a moment to reflect on the world of possibility in every encounter, no matter how brief. As we have been changed by that eternal covenant, so can we change others. Even if we do not see the result of that interaction, you have the possibility to make a world of difference for someone else. To the world, you may be but one person. But, to one person, you may be the world.

# Absalom Jones and the Episcopal Church in Delaware

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by the Lydia York

I can say with high confidence that information about Absalom Jones is scarce. Some of the events of his life represented in such documents as *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* and *Holy Women Holy Men*, have some details wrong or at best, out of order. There is little contemporary account of him. However, he is the saint from Delaware, and we should know what can be known about him. For the past several years, I have preached about Absalom Jones' celebration on his feast day, February 13, which is conveniently during Black History Month.

The Episcopal Church in Delaware should lead the Church in this celebration, because he was born as a slave in 1746 in the Cedar Creek Hundred in Sussex County on the farm of Abraham Wynkoop (an Anglican in good standing). In 1762, his enslaver, Abraham's son Benjamin Wynkoop, sold Absalom's mother, sister, five brothers, and his farm; however, he kept Absalom and moved to Philadelphia where Benjamin operated a dry goods store. This is the last we hear of Absalom Jones' birth family, although there is evidence that Blessed Absalom wrote to his family once he learned how to read and write. Absalom was 16 years old.

The histories disagree on exactly where Absalom Jones learned to read, but they agree he was permitted to attend a night school in Philadelphia operated by the Friends. History also notes that Jones participated in the African community in Philadelphia, which included those free and enslaved.

In 1770, he married an enslaved woman, Mary Thomas, with the permission of both of their enslavers, and most importantly, Mary's father, in an Anglican ceremony. Absalom basically ran a Go-Fund-Me to raise what he could, and he borrowed what he could not raise.

Benjamin Wynkoop would not permit Absalom to purchase his manumission until 1784, the year after the end of the American Revolution and three years after the surrender at Yorktown. Some accounts suggest Benjamin Wynkoop granted the manumission without payment. So, imagine working, but someone being able to take not only all of your money, but all of the property you may have purchased; and imagine the greatest risk, that you could be forcibly separated from your family.

From 1762 to 1784, Absalom Jones had been worshiping at St Peter's Anglican Church in Philadelphia. But likely, sometime after his manumission began worshiping at St George's Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1787, along with his new best friend, Richard Allen (who is celebrated in another church for different reason) started a mutual aid society, the Free

African Society. Both Jones and Allen were licensed to preach in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The active evangelism of these men led to an increase in African membership at St. Georges'.

In 1791, the Vestry of St Georges' decided the Africans should stay in the balcony instead of joining the entire congregation in prayer. They started enforcing this rule during a worship service and physically removed Absalom and other Africans during prayers of the people. The history is not clear on what exactly happened during this confrontation. Some accounts indicate they left during the service, while others say it was after the service. However, they all agree that when the praying stopped, Allen, Jones, and the rest of the Africans marched out of the parish.

In 1792, Jones and Allen started the First African Church. In subsequent years, Brother Richard started the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Blessed Absalom, to quote The Rev. Harold T. Lewis, former rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, "Jones toughed it out in the white establishment." Eventually, the congregation applied for the group to join the Protestant Episcopal Church. Some of the activities of the Free Africa Society are discussed in the Ken Burns documentary "[The American Revolution](#)."

In 1793, Philadelphia suffered an outbreak of Yellow Fever. Members of the Free African Society stayed, when everyone who could, left the city. Jones and Allen were trained as nurses. They, in turn, trained more nurses. Along with Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the few doctors who remained, Jones and Allen tended to the sick and buried the dead. Eventually, in recognition of his witness and preaching, Absalom was ordained deacon in 1795 and priest in 1802.

Jones' ministry was known for his preaching for abolition of slavery. One of his sermons is available [online](#), and other topics that were well received in his congregation but may have not been as well received at other Episcopal parishes. His ministry was marked by tireless advocacy for the dignity and rights of African Americans, including petitions against slavery and the slave trade.

It is the legacy of Absalom Jones, his faith, love, and fortitude in the face of systems that considered him "less than," that Episcopalians celebrate each February 13. He represented both Godly love and prophetic witness. He was modest in manner but fiery in advocating for African community. Whatever he may have experienced, whatever pain and disappointment he endured, he is best understood as an exemplar of brotherly love, sisterly affection, passionate exhortation, and a firm belief that we are all one in Christ.

# Bishop's Address 241st Annual Convention

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[What follows is an edited transcription of Bishop Brown's address, delivered at the 241st Annual Convention.]

Beloved of God in Delaware,

As we gather for this year's convention, we are reminded that the work of organizing ourselves — appointments, certification of a quorum, approval of agenda, welcoming convention members, granting seat and voice, parish audits, recognitions, committee reports — is not merely administrative; it is essential. Through these efforts, we ground our shared ministry and prepare to act faithfully together — I am thankful to all of you for these good works. You can view much of this work in the Convention Guidebook, [here](#).

I want to begin by reflecting on the past year and looking at the year to come. Our theme for the 241<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention comes from John 15, Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. In verse 5, Jesus says, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."*

This theme is about abiding and dwelling deeply in Christ. Amid all the important ministry to which we are called, we must remember that everything we do must be rooted in a deep dwelling in the Lord. He is the vine; we are the branches. The readings for the convention worship, taken from the lectionary for Easter 5 in Year B, include this passage.

Abiding, as it is used in this scripture, falls under our diocesan mission priority of discipleship, alongside growth, service, and unity as one church in Delaware. You can view the diocesan mission priorities [here](#). Growth is intentional; churches grow because they seek to grow. Service is fundamental to our identity as the Church—we must love our neighbors as ourselves. And discipleship, reminds us that everything must be grounded in discovering and rediscovering Jesus Christ.

Discipleship may be a churchy word but think of it simply as discovery and rediscovery — encountering Christ again and again. We can do all the ministry in the world, all the service we want to, but if we are not abiding in Christ, if the branches are not attached to that vine, then our work is in vain. Likewise, we can invite people to church, but if we ourselves are not abiding in Christ, what exactly are we inviting them into?

This year, we lift up discipleship. We focused on growth in 2024 — when Stephanie Spellers invited us to tell our stories in Jesus Christ — and service in 2023, when Catherine Meeks reminded us that racial healing begins close in. This year, we focus on abiding and rediscovering Christ.

Discovering Christ and rediscovering is the lifelong call, finding the God who is always there. Consider the story of Peter. Peter met Jesus because Jesus met him first, calling him while he was tending his nets. Peter did not know everything that first day; he only knew that Jesus was a remarkable teacher and a miracle worker. Over time, Peter discovered more: that Jesus heals, feeds the hungry, rebukes demons, and challenges the status quo. The more Peter abided in Jesus and walked with him, the more deeply he got to know him. And then one day Peter was invited with James and John to a clouded mountaintop where he saw Jesus transfigured and, in a flash, he saw the glory of the living God. Peter didn't get to know all of Jesus on day one. He had to keep discovering new truths about his Lord, new life and new possibilities. He discovered Jesus in the breaking of bread, in the resurrection, and in the forgiveness Jesus extended even after Peter betrayed him. Peter's relationship with Jesus was a lifelong journey of discovery and rediscovery — just like ours.

Our walk in discipleship must be rooted in this ongoing discovery and rediscovery of Christ. Without it, all our ministries—our global partnerships, our reconciliation work, our parish programs—lose their grounding. If the work you are doing as a parish is not rooted in the discovery of Jesus Christ, in prayer and in worship, it's not rooted in the one in which we abide. Like Mary at the feet of Jesus, we must abide. Like Martha, we serve. We need both.

This past year has been a robust year of ministry across our diocese. I feel the energy in your parishes. I want to highlight a few diocesan-wide efforts.

### **Governance Task Force**

Last year, we formed the Task Force on Governance Structure and Mission, chaired by Michael Wood. They examined whether our governance structures are flexible and responsive enough to support our mission. Their work has resulted in two resolutions that have been put before convention. The adopted resolutions, submitted by Michael on behalf of the entire task force, can be found [here](#). I am deeply grateful to Michael and his team; studying structure is rarely thrilling, but it matters because mission comes first.

### **Sanctuary and Immigration Enforcement**

At the beginning of the year, we as a diocese looked at sanctuary and immigration enforcement. Many expressed concerns and many people across the diocese were worried about the reality, the possibility, that is, that a church would lose its historically privileged status — alongside schools and hospitals, churches were once seen to be deferred to in cases of immigration enforcement or law enforcement. In a time of heightened immigration enforcement, people were worried what this might do to a church and wondered if this is something that we should be concerned about?

If law enforcement does enter during church, what does a church do? Should we even be worried about such a thing? These were not hypothetical questions; they were urgent and real. People wanted knowledge. It is particularly confusing given that enforcement that is

being discussed, and that is very much in our common life and our political discourse, is around a notoriously confusing topic — immigration and immigration status. Words like ‘illegal’ and ‘undocumented’ get passed around and people aren’t quite sure if we’re using the same language to describe the same people.

So, what did we do? Working with Episcopal Migration Ministries and the Chief Legal Officer of the Episcopal Church, and with support from our chancellor, we provided diocesan-wide education, including a Zoom workshop. We clarified basic misconceptions — for example, that the medieval notion of sanctuary as legal refuge does not apply today.

For some of us, the topic of immigration is immediately going to take our temperature up, and understandably so. It’s a major concern and topic for us as a nation and as a people.

We listened, we learned, and we summarized our findings in guidelines published in *The Net* eNewsletter in October. These guidelines were rooted partly in the wonderful work done in the Diocese of Olympia. It was not just us on the East Coast, but our brothers and sisters on the West Coast trying to come up with answers at the exact same time.

Diocesan Council reviewed and endorsed these guidelines in October, and we found that they are not only good for helping address the questions that people are asking, it is also a good resource for a question that came up at our convention in 2024. There was a floor resolution last year asking whether the Episcopal Church in Delaware should declare itself a Sanctuary Diocese. That resolution was tabled, largely because we lacked shared definitions and understanding. The newly published guidelines offer foundational clarity, though they do not tell us whether to adopt such a designation. They do, however, help us discern responsibly and faithfully the meaning of sanctuary. Most importantly, it gives people a host of resources and some basic knowledge — legal, historical, practical — so they can make ground decisions. Our work must be informed and wise — “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” You can view the sanctuary document [here](#).

### **Parish Transitions: Calvary Church, Hillcrest and All Saints’ Church, Delmar**

We continue to see some post-COVID rebound in attendance, membership, giving, and parish energy. Many of our congregations — north and south, large and small — are experiencing renewed energy and enthusiasm for the work of the church. But this rebound is not universal.

In June, Calvary Church, Hillcrest closed after 170 years of loving ministry. The church leaders worked hard and describe that the final decision was made with a heavy heart, noting that, “For 170 years, Calvary Church, Hillcrest was a vibrant, thriving Episcopal church in North Wilmington and in the spring of this year, members were forced to make the extremely difficult decision to close. We had a robust and loving (leave-taking) Eucharist on the afternoon of June 1<sup>st</sup>.” You can view a video honoring their life and legacy [here](#).

More recently, I met with every member of All Saints' Church in Delmar during a parish meeting where they voted unanimously to close. While they were thankful for my invitation to come and speak to the convention body, they simply were unable to send delegates to be at convention. The convention body will hear from them through a video that I had asked our diocesan communications director, Cynde, to produce. You can view the video [here](#). They are strong, faithful, and beloved.

And now, sisters and brothers, you have homework. At your December vestry meeting, I ask every parish — no matter your location — to draft a letter of invitation to the people of All Saints', Delmar. Tell them you witnessed their video. Honor their history. Acknowledge their hard decision. Invite them into your parish home. It is good for them — and it is good for us. They need to know that in this time of sadness they are not alone. If helpful, you can send your letter to the Mission Support Office, 913 Wilson Road, Wilmington, 19803, and I will take it to them.

Their final service will be Sunday, January 25, at 2:00 p.m. If you have never been to Delmar, take this as your invitation. Come celebrate with Delmar. We will have a leave-taking service much like we had at Calvary Church this past June. That service was among the most powerful moments I have known as your bishop, and it was powerful because so many of you came. The church was full. One of their members said, "It has not been full like this in decades." They were not sad, though, they were thrilled that so many of you were there. It matters.

The scheduled date of Sunday, January 25 may overlap with your favorite football team participating in a playoff game —but I promise you, these holy moments far outweigh anything happening on a field. I like football, too, but there's football and then there's life. Your presence in Delmar could make a profound difference to the people at All Saints' and to us, and all you need to do is show up and love them.

## **The Wider Church**

There is much happening beyond Delaware as well. Many have asked about the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, the Rt. Rev. Sarah Mullally, Bishop of London. She will become the 106<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury and the first woman to serve in this position, taking office in late January. The installation service, with all the pomp and circumstance, will take place in March. I'm thrilled for her appointment and have written to wish her every blessing in this most challenging role.

Closer to home, Province III — which I currently serve as President and previously as vice-president — is about to shift from 13 dioceses to 12. This mid-Atlantic province that Delaware is a part, includes dioceses as far north as the northern border of Pennsylvania and as far south as the southern border of Virginia. The dioceses of Bethlehem and Central Pennsylvania have voted to reunify, like reunifications we have seen in Wisconsin

(Milwaukee, Eu Claire, and Fond du Lac) in 2024 and Michigan (Eastern and Western) also in 2024. The factors that impacted those dioceses are no different than the factors that impact our churches in Delaware. This is a dynamic time in the church and it is clear that structures that may have served us in the past may not be the exact ones that we need for today. It could be diocesan boundaries or parish boundaries — change is very much in the air. Our mission is ultimately what matters. Will our structures match and support the mission that is before us?

## **Looking Ahead**

The Alaska opportunity I mentioned in last year's convention address continues to unfold, and I will share more in the coming year.

Our global mission team is exploring potential mission work in Guatemala, partnering with the Diocese of Pennsylvania. It is uncertain how this will turn out, but it looks great and is filled with possibilities. I thank the global mission team for their work.

The Church of Sweden has also reached out, inviting us to consider a more formal relationship with their diocese, rooted in our shared history with Old Swedes Church — some Swedes settled on the Christina River and built Old Swedes Parish, and they still have great affection for the church here.

We will continue to support our many students in the Stevenson School. I am pleased to hear the appreciation that has been expressed for the classes — they are hard, but the professors are great. I am grateful to those who are investing in this work.

Going into 2026, I want to mention a new challenge that we, as trustees (as your bishop, I serve as president of the trustees) face, and it is growing: a portfolio of parish properties that come to the trustees to steward. We are blessed in this diocese to have the people and the resources to do this work. Quick decisions are not necessary, and the trustees are able to honor any existing contract that a closing church may have. For example, if that church is currently renting space to a preschool or has promised that a local group can stay through the end of the year, we are able to honor the contract. This is a real gift. The trustees were not formed initially to be property managers, but we will learn. We have a new capacity that we have to build. I mention this because I want to be real when we talk about things that are changing — when it is necessary to flex our structures to be able to respond accordingly. The trustees are accustomed to managing properties such as bishopstead or diocesan offices, but now we have church buildings that are becoming part of the portfolio, and it is no longer enough to just be a property manager. The big question: what are we going to do with the church properties? As trustees, we will learn how to do this important work and how to make the best decisions. We understand that these properties matter, and we need to be as good at managing properties as we are at managing investments. We are confident in this mission.

## **In Closing**

To the past year I thank you, to the year ahead I encourage you, and may we give thanks to God Almighty and celebrate together.

There's plenty of good and holy work to do.

Amen.