

Joy in darkness

There are days when joy feels almost defiant.

Yesterday was one of those days. The sanctuary was festive. The music lifted. The sermon named a truth I believe deeply: that joy is still possible, even amid the darkness of the world. I preached it honestly, not as denial but as conviction. And yet, the darkness did not pause for our worship. It rarely does.

Even as we spoke of joy, the news carried stories of mass shootings—at Brown University, at Bondi Beach in Australia—and the memories of Sandy Hook rose again, uninvited and uncontained. They always do. Saturday night brought a message from a longtime friend: her daughter was safe. She had left Providence early, finished her exams, made it to Santa Monica. Relief arrived quietly, mixed with the sobering truth that safety now feels like something we confirm, not assume.

I spent two years working for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence when I lived in Los Angeles. Those years shaped me. They taught me how violence ripples outward—through families, through communities, through bodies that carry fear long after the headlines fade. Violence does not stay contained to one place. It lodges itself in our nervous systems, our prayers, our sleep.

By morning, more news. Another senseless loss. A familiar rhythm: waking up, reaching for the phone, bracing for impact. It was striking to realize that the usual political outrage—the expected top headline—had been pushed further down the feed by grief and shock. The world felt louder, harsher, more fragile than usual.

My coping mechanisms are well-practiced: Christmas music, Broadway show tunes, familiar melodies that hold joy without demanding too much of me. But this morning I made the mistake of tuning into the news instead. My mood dropped instantly. Fear crept in. Despair followed close behind. Turning away helps, but it doesn't undo what is happening. The violence continues whether or not I listen.

And still—I believe.

I believe what I preached. I believe God is with us, always near. “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted,” the psalmist promises, “and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). Not distant. Not abstract. Close. Near enough to feel the weight of our sorrow and not turn away.

Yet believing does not mean it is easy.

Faith does not insulate us from grief; it places us squarely within it. Jesus himself wept at the tomb of Lazarus, even knowing resurrection was coming (John 11:35). He did not bypass sorrow in the name of hope. He entered it. He stood beside those who were afraid, confused, and undone.

That is part of the calling I carry now: not only to believe, but to walk alongside others in their fear, despair, and worry. To hold space for questions that have no quick answers. To carry stories that are heavy and sacred. Paul names this burden when he writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Bearing is not light work. It presses into the shoulders and the heart.

Some days, holding it all feels daunting.

And yet, Scripture does not ask us to carry it alone. “Cast all your anxiety on God,” Peter writes, “because God cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). Not because anxiety is wrong—but because it is too much for any one person to hold indefinitely. Even pastors. Even preachers of joy.

Joy, I am learning again, is not the absence of fear or grief. It is the quiet, stubborn insistence that love still matters. That hope still flickers. That peace, however fragile, can still be found. Joy shows up not as denial, but as trust—trust that God is present even when the world feels unrecognizable.

Perhaps this is what Advent, and faith itself, keeps teaching me: that light does not erase darkness, but it does name it—and then refuses to let it have the final word. “The light shines in the darkness,” John proclaims, “and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

Some days, that light is bright and celebratory. Other days, it is small and trembling, like a candle shielding its flame from the wind. Both are holy. Both are enough.

And sometimes, faith looks like this: preaching joy on Sunday, waking up afraid on Monday, and choosing—again and again—to believe that God is still with us, still holding us, still calling us to love in a world that so desperately needs it.