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Joy in This Season

By The Rev. Rachel Rickenbaker

This year, it seems like there's even more Christmas spirit. On our street alone, almost every house is decked out in lights and inflatable Santas and gingerbread men. On our home, we have some simple outdoor Christmas decorations, and I've told my husband that, compared to other decorations on our street, our neighbors must think we are the Grinch. It seems this year that things are done up a bit more wherever you go.

Nevertheless, we know that amidst all the calls to "be merry and bright," not everything thrown our way makes us feel so jolly. Rates of COVID-19 confirmed cases are on the rise. Out of caution for safety, families and friends are cancelling or reworking holiday plans. Thanks be to God, vaccines are being distributed; but even so, people continue to get sick. Diagnoses continue to be handed over. Difficult news knows no season and does not discriminate based on the time of year.

Isn't this time of year supposed to be one of cheer, we might wonder? We may even notice the words "rejoice" and "joy" written across Christmas cards and decorations and sung in Advent and Christmas music.

As Christians, it is important for us to remember that there is a big difference between happiness and joy. I have heard many people say that God desires our happiness. Now, I do not believe God desires us to be unhappy, but happiness is circumstantial.

Happiness is something that is affected by our current situation. For instance, we may wake up on a certain day, the weather is right, things seem to be going well, and we feel happy. On another other day, the weather might seem crummy, we feel tired or burned out, things are piling up, and we don't feel happy. Happiness is a feeling based on our conditions. Happiness is based on temporary, external things.

But more than happiness, God desires our joy. Joy is a sense of God's promises being fulfilled. Joy comes from a deep gratitude for and sense of God's presence with us, even in difficult circumstances.

Catholic priest, writer, and theologian, Henri Nouwen writes in his book *Here and Now*, joy is "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death – can take that love away."

Joy can be something that we have, even when we are experiencing a mixture of emotions. I can only imagine when Mary, the mother of our Lord, lifted her voice in song, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior (Luke 1:46)," she felt a mixture of fear and joy.

To find out she was the mother of God, how amazing – and terrifying. Perhaps she even felt some sadness to know her life would not be the same – and that her son would live a life so different from others. Yet, in any number of emotions she felt, Mary still rejoiced, because she knew she would bear the Savior of the world, and the world would be changed forever.

For some, this may not feel like the most wonderful time of the year. Remember, though, that as Christians, we are not called to always be

happy. Happiness is based on our external circumstances. Instead, as followers of our Savior Jesus, we can be joyful always, no matter our circumstances.

God desires that we come to him, that we bring our full selves to him as a living sacrifice. God is always with us, and when we offer ourselves – our sinfulness, our disappointments, our sadness, our anger, whatever it is we are facing – He will carry our burdens.

This year may feel different. We may feel the need to celebrate earlier, to ramp up our celebration with more lights and music. Many may also feel grief, loneliness, frustration, and disappointment this year, as well. Know that those feelings are all okay. Our emotions can change from day-to-day, but our joy is constant because our Lord is constant. So, rejoice always, for our joy is in the one who has come and who will return again.