

Not what I expected!

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Thirty-three years ago on the third Sunday of Advent I was confirmed in the Christian faith. It was the Sunday of joy and I fully expected it to be joyful. It was not. It was a day filled with disappointment and frustration from start to finish.

I was 15 years old, a perfectionist, a rule-follower, in the early stages of an eating disorder, and more than a little idealistic. In my mind, the day I was confirmed would change my life. It would fill me with the joy and peace I was missing. It would make me a good, faithful person. I listened in class and memorized all the bits and pieces of church history and what being a member of a congregation would mean. I was ready and anxious to have this transformative event take place in my life.

As I remember it, the day was cold and foggy typical for Cape Cod in December. I was supposed to be at church early. My mother was going to drive me and stay for the service, which she didn't regularly do. I did not like to be late for anything so we got into the car extra early and headed down the street. Just after we turned onto the main road, the car died. We were still quite close to home. My anxiety increased as I was sure we'd never make it to church and I would not be confirmed. This was not how my perfect day was supposed to go.

My mother let the car coast to the side of the road and decided that we would return home and borrow the neighbor's car. Since this was long before cell phones, I'm sure we walked the quarter mile or so back and got the neighbor's car. All would be well and I would be only a few minutes later than the appointed hour. Until the borrowed car got a flat tire a couple of miles from church.

To be honest, I have no idea what happened next. I'm assuming there was a payphone nearby and my mother called someone who came and either fixed the tire or drove us to church or both. What I do remember is getting to church just minutes before the service started and being very upset because I missed out on all the explanations and directions others were given. I was there, though, and I would be confirmed.

There were five or six of us who would be confirmed that day. Each of us was paired with a deacon who would lead the laying on of hands. When I realized who my deacon was, I was horrified. This was the one deacon I didn't like for reasons that were likely very logical in my 15-year-old brain and now escape my recollection. In that moment, I was sure this deacon would somehow ruin the whole thing. He didn't. In spite of all my stress and tears the words I viewed as nearly magical were said, and I was confirmed.

And hugely disappointed because my life did not change. Not one iota. I felt no closer to God. My pains and struggles were still there. I gained no super powers for self-improvement that day. What happened to the joy I was promised and desperately wanted?

All the emotions of that day feel silly to me now. Looking back, I can see that the Spirit was already at work in my life doing things in the mysterious way God has. After all, I was ordained a mere ten years later. While I caught glimpses of joy in those years, it took many more before joy became a part of my life.

When I hear the texts this week, I can't help but think of those years when I expected a God who never showed up. I expected a God who would claim my life and make it new in that instant. Somehow, I believed that if I were "doing it right," I'd be happy, healthy, and whole. No doubt that many of those "brood of vipers" John the Baptist addressed had similar thoughts. I think John had thoughts like that, too. Jesus was going to come and fix everything. You know, set the people free and all that. Well, no such luck.

And a few years later Paul comes along and tells us to "rejoice in the Lord always." How? The world is a mess. God hasn't fixed a darn thing. People are the same flawed, fragile folks we've always been. Where's this joy we've been promised?

That's just the thing. The joy is everywhere all the time because God has already been one of us. God has already cracked open the bleakest, coldest places in the world to allow in hope and warmth. There's always an alternative to the fear and anxiety that is soul destroying. And it isn't about just one person. It's about all of us allowing for the possibility of the Mystery guiding us toward something else, away from our expectations. We are to share one another's burdens and one another's joys. When we enter into honest relationship with each other, then the power and warmth that is Holy pours through us and into the lives of others. And the world

changes.

My mistake on that Sunday so long ago was in thinking that being confirmed in faith was all about me. It wasn't. It was about God working in the world, touching the particularity of me, inviting me into a much greater whole. If I am honest, I still have days when I wonder where the joy is, but mostly I feel it when I am still long enough to see that God is present, still working against my expectations and offering what the world really needs. And catching me by surprise nearly every time.

If we aren't experiencing the hope, peace, joy, and love of God this Advent season, perhaps we need to adjust our expectations.

*Originally posted at [Write Out of Left Field](#)*