

Joy in the Darkness

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

December 11, 2022, Third Sunday of Advent, Pageant Sunday, Sunday of Joy

The Nativity Story in Luke and Matthew

Welcome: Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those of you online to this year's Christmas pageant of the United Church of Strafford. We are so blessed to have this wonderful way to look at Christmas through the Nativity Puppet Show created by Rachel Guaraldi and told through her rich perspective as a chaplain, minister & mother. Rachel has been inspired by puppetry of the Waldorf tradition and wonder-based storytelling of Godly Play and her own deep, creative spirit. (To see the video of this nativity story go to our website at <https://unitedchurchofstrafford.com/past-services/>.)

Today is all about joy, and two of the things that give this congregation greatest joy are nurturing children and youth, and being a caring and supportive spiritual home. If you have ever gone through a hard time and felt the love of this church, you know how valuable and powerful this community can be. Please continue the spirit of loving community after the service here in the sanctuary and on Zoom, extending your care especially to those you do not know and those you know are struggling so that everyone may feel that this is their spiritual home today...

Advent Candle Lighting III

Today we light the pink candle for joy. Not happiness, mind you, but joy. They are different.

When I was a boy my brothers and I would wake up very early on Christmas morning and rush down to the fireplace to open our stockings. We were so happy! But then we had to wait for our parents to wake up and we were not allowed even to see the tree until my father finished his cup of coffee, which took forever.

Opening presents we were happy again! But then it was done, and we crashed.

Later that night we would have a yummy Christmas dinner and be happy! But then the adults sat around talking. Boring!

But that is when my old Uncle Arch would wink and nod at me and we would sneak upstairs to play with my new toys. He was a boy at heart, and he loved children, so he was the

most fun to play with of anyone I knew. Then I was not just happy, I felt a deep joy that I still carry with me sixty years later.

That is Advent joy, the joy that Jesus gives us, the joy of deep connection and kindness and love. Happiness comes and goes, but the joy we celebrate today lasts forever.

Let us remember the words of the angels at the birth of Jesus: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people...”

Jesus taught us to love God and neighbor, and treat all the earth with love. He said if we did that, we would have complete joy.

We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the light of that joyful love of God, of neighbor and of the earth. It is a joy that can come to us at Christmas or any time that we open our hearts to love, even in the midst of the hardest struggle or darkest night. This special joy that Jesus taught us is a light that shines in the darkness—it is so bright that even darkness cannot hide its brightness.

As Christmas approaches, we ask God both for the laughter and pleasures that make for happiness, and for the loving connections that make for joy. We know, though, that many of us are not happy. Many of us miss people at Christmas. Many are worried or sick or in pain. So we pray for one another and for everyone that we may all find the joy that does not depend on things being perfect. May we find it in love present or love remembered, and in the knowledge that God’s love is with us always. This is the joy Jesus wants us to have.

So who do you want to pray for today, that they may feel this joy...? Let’s pray really hard for them to feel love and joy. Let us pray in silence, saying please, God, may it be so...

Call to Worship— We have had an outburst of Christmas joy this morning, which is fine. Irrepressible joy is part of Advent. But so, too, is a quieter, deeper joy, a feeling of longing and a wide-awake, watchful silence as we wait, like letting our night vision adjust to see the light that shines in the darkness from the stars behind the stars.

It is the darkest time of the year and some of us struggle with that for good reason. Some forms of darkness feel hopeless and terrifying, but the secret of Advent joy is that darkness can also be a beautiful thing. It is not that light is good and darkness is bad, we need both, we need to

wait in the darkness of the womb or we cannot be born, we need darkness in order to be able to see the beauty of the stars.

Here is one of my favorite poems by Wendell Berry. I return to it every Advent.

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

Some of those wings in the dark are angel wings. Some of those feet belong to a donkey carrying Mary to Bethlehem. Jesus is born in the dark, and to know that dark, we need to go into the dark ourselves.

The best way through a hopeless, fearful dark is to be present to it, having compassion on ourselves, reaching out for help, opening to the Spirit's merciful love.

The best way to experience darkness as beautiful and transformative is also to be present to it, opening to the Spirit within it.

So I hope between now and Christmas Eve you can open your heart to what can happen when we empty ourselves of self-concern and slow down and are fully present to the darkness and the light, savoring the rituals and music and these beloved people in this beautiful church and village and earth, as we wait and watch together in quiet, and even joyful, anticipation...

[There is no sermon on Pageant Sunday.]

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Be like a child.
Be thrilled with the World.
Each day a discovery.