

December 13, 2020
Third Sunday of Advent
“I Believe in God: Ode to Joy”



"Whatever may be the tensions and the stresses of a particular day, there is always lurking close at hand the trailing beauty of forgotten joy or unremembered peace."

- Howard Thurman

“Discovering more joy does not, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreaks without being broken.” - **Desmond Tutu**

“Joy is an act of resistance” - **Toi Derricotte**

"One filled with joy preaches without preaching." - **Mother Teresa**

“Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy.” - **Leo Buscaglia**

“When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy.” - **Rumi**

“Scatter joy!” - **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

ORDER OF WORSHIP

WE GATHER

GREETING/WELCOME/ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning and welcome! My name is Elisa Lucozzi and I am pastor to the beloved community that is Guilford Community Church. It is my great joy to welcome you this morning for our third Sunday of Advent, a celebration of joy.

With the rise in cases of COVID, we continue to gather online because we love and care about our congregation and our community, because we want to maintain physical distancing in a way that helps us to feel connected but also keeps us all safe. Although it is hard to be physically distant from one another especially at this time of year, we also know that it can't keep our hearts from connecting and we know it is indeed the best way of caring for one another right now. Let us keep creating new ways of being church because we know that being church has nothing to do with a building and everything to do with loving each other. Let us gather to be the church in a new way with a welcome wide enough for all.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Luminaries

Tom Green announcement

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Christmas Eve Lessons and Carols Service

So, as we begin today let us acknowledge and honor this land we occupy by honoring and acknowledging those First Nation people to whom this land belongs:

We gather here on the bank of the Broad Brook
In the shadow of the great Mount Wantastiquet
In the valley of the rushing Connecticut
to worship and discern together the call of God
to the United Church of Christ for these days,
let us know that we do so on the hunting grounds
and homelands of the Mahican and Penacook people,
as well as the southernmost members of the Abenaki
Tribe.

These people used this land since time immemorial
and are still among us in the present.
We offer them our gratitude and respect,
Our repentance and hope in solidarity with them...

**It is a Holy Communion we share of life on earth,
of past and present, of pain and reconciliation,
of mystery and majesty...let us begin.**

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

This week, we turn to Luke's writing, which is an account in two acts: The Gospel biography of Jesus and then the story of the early church—the "Jesus community." Whether you were a Jew or Gentile in those days, deciding to become a part of this illegal early Christian movement could bring punishment for your allegiance. Surely, the message in both Luke and Isaiah that the downcast, lowly, and oppressed would rise up, is a welcome and inspirational account. Like the Jewish exiled people of Isaiah's time and like the early Christians, we also sometimes wonder where God is in our suffering. We long to hear the promise that a reason for joyful praise is the good news on the way!

I believe in God, I believe in God,
even when, even when God is silent.

I believe in God, I believe in God,
even when, even when God is silent.

Reader: The loneliness of fear
The invisibility of the next step
The yearning for presence

Prayer

Holy One,
we thank you for the glimpses we catch
of your gift of the depths of joy.
Even in the midst of fear,
of challenge, of struggle—
even when we are not sure
of your presence,
ignite the flame of joy within us,

**People: ... that we might glow with its brilliance
from the inside out.**

**I believe in God,
I believe in God,
even when... even when...
God is silent.**

Pastor: Help us face the silence of unknowing
and embrace it as the pregnant pause before joyful new beginnings.

Amen.

OPENING HYMN: #124 "My Heart Sings Out With Joyful Praise" words by Ruth Duck,
music traditional *Perrin Scott, Ellen Crockett, Mike Meyer, Tom Yahner and Peter Amidon;*
Patty Meyer, organ

WE PROCLAIM

Children's Time to Shine

CHILDREN'S STORY: Red and Lulu by Matt Tavares, *Sue Owings*

PRAYER FOR THE CHILDREN

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

Isaiah 57: 14-19 *Bill Warriner*

It will be said: "Survey, survey; build a road!
Remove barriers from my people's road!"
The one who is high and lifted up,
who lives forever, whose name is holy, says:
I live on high, in holiness,
and also with the crushed and the lowly,
reviving the spirit of the lowly,
reviving the heart of those who have been crushed.

I won't always accuse,
nor will I be enraged forever.
It is my own doing that their spirit is exhausted—
I gave them breath!
I was enraged about their illegal profits;
I struck them; in rage I withdrew from them.
Yet they went on wandering wherever they wanted.
I have seen their ways, but I will heal them.
I will guide them,
and reward them with comfort.

And for those who mourn,
I will create reason for praise:
utter prosperity to those far and near,
and I will heal them, says the Lord.

ANTHEM: "Magnificat", words adapted from Luke 1: 46-55, music Peter Amidon,
GCC Virtual Choir, Patty Meyer piano

Each week, we are presenting a musical piece that the choir worked on this fall in preparation, to fill our worship with music and our dark nights with the light of joy. What a gift this has been, when we were afraid we would have no music this Advent! We have also been witnessing the power of music through documentaries, that open us to lives transformed by the presence of instrument and song.

Magnificat

adapted by Peter Amidon from Luke 1: 46- 55

My soul doth magnify the Lord.
And my spirit hath rejoiced in the Lord.
He regarded me his humble servant.
Humble servant to the Lord, He hath scattered the proud and the conceited.

And behold all generations shall call me blessed.
Generations, generations, generations,
And behold all generations shall call me blessed, blessed.
Generations, generations, generations,

My soul doth magnify the Lord.
He hath brought down princes from their thrones.
He regarded me his humble servant.
He exalted the humble and filled the hungry with good things

And his mercy is from generations through all time.
Generations, generations, generations.
And his mercy shall go on for endless generations.
Generations and generations.

For this moment, we present to you a rallying call, much like Mary's Magnificat, which we will hear in our Gospel reading today. She lifts her voice and says that God will show mercy and lift up the lowly. This simple song overlays the idea that we must resist the injustices of the world and, at the same time, pray for our enemies, welcome the stranger, and show love to our neighbors.

Gospel Reading

Luke 1: 1-4; 26-56 *Bill Warriner*

Many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the Word handed down to us. Now, after having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, I have also decided to write a carefully ordered account for you, most honorable Theophilus. I want you to have confidence in the soundness of the instruction you have received...

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive

and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God."

Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Mary said,

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored
because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God.

He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,

just as he promised to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE: Hymn #617 "Write These Words in Our Hearts"

HYMN: “Shout for Joy” traditional African American spiritual, *GCC Virtual Choir*

Shout for Joy

American spiritual

Mary Had a baby, (Shout for joy)
Mary had a baby. (shout for joy)
She had him in a stable,
She laid him in a manger.
She had him in a stable,
She laid him in a manger.
Well there were angels watching over him,
And named him King Jesus.

He was the Prince of Peace, (He was...)
He was a mighty counselor, (He was...)
King of kings, on Christmas, in the morning.
Wo Lord, shout for joy;
Oh Lord, shout for joy.
(a singin') Oh Lord, shout for joy;
Oh Lord, shout for joy.

Now Herod heard the news,
Herod heard the news.
Well he sent some soldiers,
But the soldiers couldn't find 'em.
Well the soldiers couldn't find 'em,
Because they ran away to Egypt.
They ran away to Egypt,
And there were angels watching over them.

Well Mary rode a donkey,
And Joseph walked beside her.
Well there were angels watching over them,
They named him King Jesus.
Oh Mary had a baby,
She laid him in a stable.
She laid him in a manger,
She named him King Jesus.

SERMON: I Believe In God: Joy Down in My Heart

An Excerpt from Walt Whitman’s Poems of Joy/Stanza 4

⁴O the joy of my spirit! It is uncaged! It darts
like lightning!

It is not enough to have this globe, or a certain time
—I will have thousands of globes, and all time.

I invite you to pray with me – **May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, loving and gracious God.**

When preparing to write this sermon on the theme of joy this week, I had a flood of songs come to mind. The excerpt I just read is from a collection of poems about joy, written by Walt Whitman. Lines from this collection have been set to music by Norman Dello Joio in a piece entitled “A Jubilant Song”. It was one of the more challenging pieces I first learned and performed in my high school vocal ensemble. I’ve included a link to a performance of the piece in your resources for additional prayer and reflection.

Another is an African American spiritual. The most famous recording is by the great Shirley Ceasar, and has recently been resurrected by the Resistance Revival Chorus, a group of women who are using music to help sustain and uplift people working for justice. The words say:

*This joy I have the world didn't give it to me.
The world didn't give it and the world can't take it away.*

Like most African American spirituals, there is at its core a resilience, a resistance, a joy, even in the face of oppression.

The song I sang as part of the children’s blessing is also a familiar “joy” song. How many of you learned that song at camp like I did? So, I have a confession – the reason why this song stuck out wasn’t just because it had the word joy in it, or because it reminded me of camp. It was because the lyric really fit – I’ve got that joy *down* in my heart. *Down in my heart*. Because it feels buried.

The opposite of joy that derives from fear is worry. Worry is the illusion that we can somehow prevent tomorrow’s heartache. When we live in worry, we live not in the present but our minds keep us tending an unknown future.

We often miss the joy of what is occurring right now and miss opportunities to be fully present, to others with our attention and support. When we are robbed of our joy, it is difficult to create more joy in the world.

Now, I know all of this, but that doesn’t stop me from being a world class worrier. Worrying is just one part of it. Look around at all there is, which would have us utterly in despair. So, if I do have joy down in my heart, it is buried:

by the grief of so many lives lost to this horrible pandemic,
by the murders of one black and brown sibling after another,
by the brutal and corrupt dictatorship that our democracy has become,
by the ever-growing evidence of how we have mistreated the earth,
by the complete disregard for the millions who have to choose between buying their medication and feeding their families,

by knowing that there are human beings who are still being caged in conditions we wouldn't even want for our animals,
on and on....

So, I think it's easy to see why I, and maybe you, have to really go down into our hearts to find some joy. I have to dig down really deep to find it. In other words, I have to go mining for it! Here's a few places I looked. I went to Scripture and there are two passages that stood out for me.

"I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." - John 15:11

Jesus is telling his disciples about love - "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love."

² My friends, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. - James 1:2-4

Our Gospel story this morning recalled this passage from James to me. It focuses on Mary and the great potential for worry, doubt and fear that she faced when she was called by God to do something which seemed impossible.

I dare say that this is one of the most well-known stories from the Bible and perhaps also one of the most controversial. Doubtless belief in the virgin birth has been a litmus test for Christians throughout the centuries. Still, there are so many parts of this story that, to be quite honest, seem unbelievable, beyond reason – not what we are expecting. If that's the way we feel even now, just imagine what might have been going through Mary's mind when suddenly, an angel appears to her and tells her she is going to have a child, and not just ANY child but the Son of God! Most pregnancy announcements can come certainly with joy and also with some worry, but this one was a bit of a doozy!

Mary, a young woman – historical information from that time would tell us that she was likely in her teens, betrothed to a man named Joseph, and here's the most difficult part – she had never "been with" a man. It would be easy not to believe her – we do it all the time with women who try to come forward and tell us their truth.

Here's the thing, it was a dangerous time to be young, unwed and pregnant. Bearing children was an act that often meant risking your life, but being unwed meant that she could very well have been stoned to death. Then there is the small matter of reputation. You live in Vermont. I think you all know how gossip spreads in a small town. This morning, however, I am going to encourage you to gossip all you want about this unwed teenager's pregnancy!

Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel is a moment of Holy inbreaking, a moment when the world is turned on its head, and what seems impossible becomes possible, and that, my friends, is indeed a reason to rejoice.

There are more reasons than this that the story seems unbelievable. The prophets foretold the coming of a King, so how would it be possible for a King to be born of a young girl with absolutely no status?

What else is possible? That a young girl with no status be greeted by an angel calling her "favored one". Twice, Gabriel refers to Mary as "favored". What does it mean to be favored by God?

One might think that if you are favored by God, all your prayers will be answered exactly the way YOU want. Our popular culture would say one receives God's favor by good behavior. The theory goes: God's favor comes to those who give something to God. God chooses Mary because she has nothing – a young girl in a society that values men and maturity. She even identifies herself as lowly and poor in her song of praise.

In other words, she is not favored in the human realm, by our standards, yet God has shown favor with her, thus aligning her with God's work of justice in the world – the work her son will continue in his ministry. See, Jesus takes after his mother too! The apple didn't fall far from the tree. I always say, Jesus learned his best stuff from his mother. The words of the Magnificat, this song about justice, was being sung to him even when he was still in the womb.

So, what is Mary's response to this? Well I don't know about you, but if an angel appeared to me out of nowhere, I would certainly be startled. It seems that she wasn't as perplexed by the news of her pregnancy as she was by being called "favored one". It was that which she pondered. Mary speaks few words in her response, but they are the words of one who is empowered to stand alongside God to bring about justice in the world. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; *let it be* with me according to your word."

If we can believe any of this, then what else might be possible if we, like Mary, respond to God with a YES? Perhaps peace in our hearts, in our homes, in our world.

The second part of the Gospel we heard this morning is also part of Mary's response: her song of praise – the Magnificat. Mary has gone to see her cousin Elizabeth, who the angel tells her is also with child, although she is way beyond childbearing age. We are told that Elizabeth's child "leapt in her womb," "jumped for joy" when hearing Mary's greeting. It is there that Mary shared her radical song.

It is there she sings her song of hope that we have come to know as the “Magnificat” meaning “magnifies”, based on the traditional first words of Mary’s song – “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

This world, the times we live in, now mirrors the world in which Mary spoke those radical words. It is into this world that Love incarnate takes human form and lives among us. The Son of God born to an unwed teenage mother is not what we were expecting and yet a reason to jump for joy. Or, as our anthem said this morning “Shout for Joy”!

This song that Mary brings isn’t the same old song and dance either. The lyrics to her song may be borrowed from sections of the Hebrew Scriptures, but this is the remix. It is a subversive, revolutionary song which makes bold declarations about a God capable of upending societies and governments, uplifting those on the margins ... it is proclaiming God’s intention to turn things on their heads!

Did you notice that Mary’s words are in the present tense? Not that it will happen, but that it is already happening. It’s as if her words manifested God’s presence, her song birthed Love’s presence into the world.

Read it again. Anything sound familiar in Mary’s Magnificat? Notice anything similar between Mary’s song and Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19)? Like, everything!

Jesus’ understanding of his purpose for his ministry restates his mother’s understanding of God working in her life. Jesus senses the essence of his ministry because he learned it from Mary. Jesus isn’t just making stuff up. He’s giving voice to how he grew up. He’s articulating what he’s been taught. He’s known this from the beginning, since the first beat of his heart.

It’s what his mother preached. It’s what his mother lived. It’s what his mother taught him to be. It’s how his mother interpreted Scripture. It’s what his mother shared about who she knew God to be. It’s what his life of faith embodied. Jesus can witness to the God he knows because he heard his mother give witness to the God she knew.

So here is our question for this third Sunday of Advent, this day of joy. How are you being called to sing new lyrics to Mary’s Song – to sing a song of hope and peace and joy and love this Christmas and in the new year, so that your soul may ever more fully magnify God?

Will you jump for joy knowing that God with us is being born unto us?

Joy in the face of uncertainty,
joy in the wilderness,
joy even in the face of persecution.

JOY in the face of oppression, fascism and discrimination is a radical act.

So be radical! Rejoice! In the words of the great writer Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Scatter joy!”

*This Joy that I have the world didn't give to me
The world didn't give it and the world can't take it away*

Advent is a season for remembering that the joy that makes its way toward us does not depend on mere happiness. Joy is made of stronger stuff than this. Joy is what comes when, in days that tempt us toward despair, we choose to celebrate—not in denial of the causes of despair, but in defiance. In hope. In delight. So, let us move forward in this Advent season, paving the way with joy and gladness for the One who comes to sing for us and with us, ever renewing us with His love. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

“Stillness”

I invite you to get in a comfortable position of rest.
I invite you to get as quiet and still as you can.
I invite you to a deep breath and a deep listening posture—perhaps eyes closed or fixed on a candle—as we prepare for a time of prayer.

The gentle pull of God
is often lost amidst the rush
of all the obligations which lay a claim on us.

Yet just beyond the frantic pace
our restless feet have trod
lie deep still pools of quietness—
the dwelling place of God.

O take me to that secret place
where lost in wonder and in awe,
the moment comes and I rejoice
to be and be with God.

Meet me in the stillness, Lord
Be the air I breathe
Meet me in the stillness, Lord
Free me to receive

Video: *Still Coda*

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE: “Litany of Belief” Brian Remer/Nanci Leitch

In times when humanity disappoints,
perhaps when even our own thoughts and behaviors disappoint,
it is an important act to call out, name and claim, the consequences of our wrongs.
And in times of distress it is a prophetic act to call out, name and claim, our belief in

the promise of joy.

Leader: I believe that we have sometimes been silent in the face of injustice AND

***People:* I believe that we are capable of raising our voices and insisting on goodness for all.**

I believe that we have been afraid of feeling deeply, making our joy small AND

**I believe that the deep joy of community can always be present,
even in hard times.**

I believe that sometimes we wonder if we can make a difference AND

I believe that small acts of kindness and help do make a real difference.

We believe, even when we are discouraged.

**We believe, that when we are discouraged,
raising our voices for justice will offer us joy!**

Now let us say together the prayer that Jesus taught us using whatever words help us to embody its promise. May we bring about one small glimpse of the (kingdom) of God, a kin-dom where all are well, all are fed and free, where all are whole, where all know love, where *all* are beloved.

Let us pray: Our Father, (Our Father/Mother, Our Creator) who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom (kin-dom) come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom (kin-dom) and the power and the glory, now and forever. Amen.

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE: #278 "Hear Our Prayer, Oh Lord"

OFFERTORY

CALL TO OFFERING

Supporting the church and the mission of the church is more important than ever. You can still send in your weekly offerings to the church via US mail **38 Church Dr. Guilford, VT 05301** or consider using our online "offering plate" by going to the church's website and clicking the PayPal donation button on the home page. So now let us gather up all these offerings as well as the offering of our time and talents and dedicate them to continuing the work of showing more love in the world.

DOXOLOGY

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Believe, with a joyful heart!

Believe, and shine your light!

Believe, because the song we sing is sung for all!

And now let the weak say, "I am strong;"

let the poor say, "I am rich
because of what our God has done for us."
Believe!

CLOSING HYMN: "See Now Like a Phoenix Rising" words by Billy Bragg, music by Beethoven, arr. by Paul Halley, *GCC virtual choir, Peter Amidon banjo*

BENEDICTION

We wait for justice
but we do not wait to work for change;

We wait for restored health
but we do not wait to work to heal;

We wait for wholeness
but we do not wait to work at binding brokenness;

We wait for peace
but we do not wait to work to eliminate hatred.

And so, my friends, like bells ringing out the news
that God is ever-present with us,
fill the night left by sadness with messages of joy.
Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep that joy alive in you
and that spur you on in your work of justice and reconciliation.

Raise your voices and repeat after me...

"do not be afraid!"

"do not be afraid!"

Amen!

THREEFOLD AMEN

POSTLUDE

For further reflection and prayer:

"This Joy" by the Resistance Revival Chorus

Jubilant Song by Norman Dello Joio performed by Albany Pro Musica
A performance of Whitman's Poems of Joy set to music

SALT Project Magnificat

A short film of Mary's magnificent words.

How Joy Works A Blessing by Jan Richardson

You could not stop it if you tried— how this blessing begins to sing every time it sees your face, how it turns itself in wonder merely at the mention of your name. It is simply how joy works, going out to you when you least expect, running up to meet you when you had not thought to ask.

Family movie of the week: **Frosty the Snowman**

Available from the Brooks Memorial Library

Adult/Youth film of the week: **Following the Ninth**

Watch the entire movie here for free: <https://youtu.be/EPWpV3BWLJs>