

Pageant Sunday and Sunday of Joy Service
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
December 12, 2021 Third Sunday of Advent, Pageant Sunday, Sunday of Joy
The Nativity Story

Welcome and Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Third Sunday of Advent. 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 raised a child here or gone through a hard time and felt the love of this church, you know what a blessing it can be. Please continue the spirit of loving community by greeting one another after the service, extending your care especially to the children and those you do not know and those you know are struggling, so that everyone here may feel that this is their spiritual home today.

We have had an outburst of Christmas joy this morning with Rachel Guaraldi's beautiful Nativity Puppet Show. Irrepressible joy is part of Advent, but so too is a quieter, deeper joy, a feeling of longing for something we know will be really good, and a wide-awake, watchful silence as we wait for it, 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, but the secret of Advent joy is that darkness can 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.

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.

So I hope between now and Christmas Eve you can open your heart to the beautiful things that 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, joyful anticipation...

Week after week Joey Hawkins and Danette Harris give our children such loving gifts of stories and wisdom. I am so grateful that when we were only on Zoom earlier this year I got to experience how amazing their gifts are. The joy of it moved me to tears more than once. So I invite them to come forward now to light our Advent candles, and I invite all the children to come back up to watch and maybe help.

Lighting of the Advent Candle: Today we light the pink candle for joy. Not happiness, mind you, but joy. They are different.

When I was a boy my big 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. 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: The first angel said, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people...." And the heavenly host added, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward all."

Jesus grew up to lead us to justice and peace. He gave us the great commandments to love God and neighbor, and treat all the earth with love. He explained in the Gospel of John, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of Christ's light into the world. With Christ's advent comes joy, a joy that can be ours at Christmas or any time that we open our hearts to love, even in the midst of the hardest struggle or darkest night. Christ's joy is a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome.

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 who are no longer with us. Many of us are worried or sick or suffering hardship. We ask that we all may experience the joy that does not depend on earthly happiness. May we find it in love present or love remembered, and in the knowledge that God's love is with us always. That is the joy of God's realm on earth.

Call to Prayer and Call to Offering

One of Advent's gifts is the invitation to enter into silence and wait in expectation that the light of the world is coming, and is here with us even now. Let us lift all our joys and concerns and prayer requests to God in silence, and then simply rest in faith as if waiting and watching in the dark for the rising of a star over the horizon, knowing that God is in here and out there, and we are held in grace. Let us pray in silence...

Please remember that we are taking our offering in two ways. There is a basket at the back of the sanctuary, or you may make online donations on the Welcome Page of our website just below the slideshow.

Nobel peace prize winner Albert Schweitzer said, "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know—the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve." By really happy he meant the joy that comes through meaningful connection and love. That is what we receive when we give of ourselves to help Jesus create on earth the loving, compassionate, just and peaceful world he envisioned.

Thank you for participating in that joyful giving however and whenever you do.

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

At rest now
the fields and the woods
the apple tree and the old hay rake.