

Pageant Sunday, Third Sunday of Advent, Candle of Joy
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
December 10, 2023
The Nativity Story from Matthew and Luke

Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online to the 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, teacher, spiritual director and mother. Rachel has been inspired by puppetry of the Waldorf tradition and wonder-based storytelling of Godly Play and her own creative spirit. Thank you so much, Rachel, for sharing your gifts with us!

After the Pageant:

Advent Candle Lighting: Today we light the pink candle. This is a tradition from when Advent was like Lent, a time of no parties, no yummy foods, no joyful music—except on the third Sunday, called Gaudete, or Joy Sunday. Today we light the candle not of happiness, but of joy. Here is the difference. Imagine you are shipwrecked alone on a desert island, sad and afraid. One day a box bobs up on shore with funny books and cute kitten and puppy photos. You laugh and feel distracted from your problem. That is happiness, but it's just on the surface, and it doesn't last long. Then one day a ship appears. As it draws near you see your family has come to save you and you feel joy so deep you cry. Advent joy is not as much about getting gifts that make us momentarily happy as the coming of someone whose love will save us from desert islands of loneliness or grief or fear, someone who can bring us home to hope and peace and joy all the days of our life.

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.

Call to Worship: It is now my job to reorient us and remind us what Advent means. The spiritual wisdom behind the season of Advent leads us on a path that simulates times when we feel lost in the dark. Advent encourages contemplative practices that help us find light within the darkness, and make a virtue of waiting in silence. Active Advent practices give us comfort and strength in hard times, things like creating the loving community of a congregation and helping others who are lost in their own kind of shadows.

We have had an outburst of Christmas joy this morning, which is fine. Irrepressible joy can be part of Advent. But so, too, is a quieter, deeper joy, a feeling of longing and a wide-awake, watchfulness as we wait for a coming light, like letting our night vision adjust to see the stars behind the stars on the clearest night. We are waiting for the light that filled Jesus to transform us and transform our world in the direction of love and peace.

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.

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 and sharing our own love with others who are in the darkness.

The best way to experience the beautiful moments of darkness is also to be present to them, and let them transform us.

So I hope between now and Christmas Eve you can open your heart to what can happen when we 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 of what we only hope with all our hearts is coming...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

I sing to shed light
into darkness,
to find my way to the Spirit.