

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor



Third Sunday of Advent

December 12, 2021

PRELUDE “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”

WELCOME AND  
ANNOUNCEMENTS

Sunday night at Prayer Station (Methodist Church): 5:15 – Chili Dog Supper, 6 – caroling singalong  
Advent Devotionals have arrived

CALL TO WORSHIP (based on Isaiah 12:5–6)

Sing praises to God on high, for glorious are God’s works.

**Sing praises to the ends of the earth.**

Shout and sing for joy, O people of God,

**for great is the Holy One in our midst,**

**blessed is the One who comes to dwell among us.**

(Harry Disher, <https://www.united-church.ca/worship>)

HYMN No. 120 “The Advent of Our God”

The Advent of our God With eager hearts we greet;

And we must praise Him in this hour With hymns and anthems sweet.

All glory to the Son, Who comes to set us free;  
With Father, Spirit, ever One Through all eternity.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

**Move us, Joyful God, take our hands and lead us in your dance of creation. When we are uncertain, guard our hearts with your peace. When our steps falter, surround us with the strength of your Spirit. Guide us, Dancing God, until we move and sing with the joy of your salvation. In the name of Emmanuel, God with Us, we pray, Amen.**

(Nancy C. Gowler, <https://ruminari.wordpress.com/2009/12/09/advent-3c-call-to-worship>)

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLES

Gail Carlson, Janice Solum

We will light three candles  
to sparkle with joy.  
For God lights constellations  
and the tips of angel wings  
light years far away,  
and light years as near as breath.

We light (and help to blow out)  
ninety-five candles on a birthday cake,  
the high circle of a Ferris wheel,  
the smile of a pumpkin,  
marshmallow of a 'smore,  
branches of a Christmas tree,

and the luminarias that say  
this is a church that welcomes all,  
every age, race, education,  
ability, orientation, ethnic origin,  
gender identity, job status,

old friend or stranger becoming new one,  
those who claim their history  
and their identity,  
others who close their lips to listen  
and feel the joy in their hearts.

**We raise three candles,  
and know we cannot do it by ourselves  
for each of us have only two hands.**

For ordinary, available, gentle, brave,  
and with wide-open doors,  
is the hope, peace and joy of Advent.

**(We) will light Candles this Christmas,  
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,  
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,  
Candles of courage for fears ever present,  
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,  
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,  
Candles of love to inspire all (our) living,  
Candles that will burn all year long.** (Howard Thurman) (Maren Tirabassi, Gifts in Open Hands)

HANDBELLS    *“Joy to the World”*

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;  
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter Jerusalem!

The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,  
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
you shall fear disaster no more.

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

The LORD, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing  
as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,  
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

I will deal with all your oppressors  
at that time.

And I will save the lame  
and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.

At that time I will bring you home,  
at the time when I gather you;  
for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your eyes, says the LORD.

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation;  
I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;  
he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:  
Give thanks to the LORD,  
call on his name;  
make known his deeds among the nations;  
proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;  
let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,  
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

## SERMON

I wonder how this whole Advent/Christmas journey is going for you this year. Honestly, I'd really love to sit down with each of you and talk about that, listen to what you'd be willing to say. Is this a season overflowing with excitement and energy? Are you getting more and more wound up and enthused with each day, each gift you buy, each batch of cookies you make, each package you wrap, each card you write alongside those you receive? What are you looking forward to most – or is there nothing you're looking forward to? Are the crowds, the cost and the calories wearing you out and bringing you down, while the length of the undone to-do list keeps you awake at night? Have you so simplified your observance of the season that there doesn't seem to be much left? From my experience, it can go either way, up or down, and sometimes it changes from day to day, if not minute by minute. Maybe you really don't want me to even ask these questions because you're trying so hard to keep the smile in place, the bow where it belongs and the jingle bells ready to jingle. But then there are the tough family issues some of you are dealing with, the losses and loneliness that have a way of resurfacing at the holidays no matter how firmly you ban them from making an appearance. And if you're spared any of that pain and emptiness, there's always the news, more than willing to step in and cast a shadow. Covid counts and variants, school and street violence, tornadoes touching down and amber alerts for those gone missing and the never-ending political bickering and accusation-lobbing that come at us from any and all directions.

Tell me: just how ready do you feel for today, the Sunday of Joy? Maybe you've got it handled, life is good and joy is your theme-song; or maybe it's the last thing you want to hear and the hardest feeling for you to fake. Or maybe, if we can find a way to ignore the world and turn off the news, maybe we can get ourselves to joy. We'll put on blinders, concentrate on the beautiful promises and upbeat music, block out the pain and drown out the news, and see what we can do to dance to joy.

I'll admit that's more than a little bit where I am; joy seems pretty elusive and out of reach these days. But as I live with today's texts and the meaning that's woven into the very heart of joy, it seems to me that it's the perfect word for today and for us, whether we're on top of the world with the beauty and wonder of the season, or struggling to haul ourselves out of bed and into a position to hear a word on joy.

The passages I just read from Zephaniah and Isaiah are both overflowing with the call to praise and celebration, the gift and grace of joy, but when we stop and look at the context they come out of, it's clear they are not songs giddy with the effervescence of a glorious new day. Some of the gloomiest passages in all of the Old Testament are in Zephaniah, where the prophet is near despair over the spiritual and political corruption of Judah, corruption that's being driven by the very leaders who are supposed to make life better for the poor and the oppressed. In the midst of great anguish and anger, the clouds disperse, the day breaks and the prophet calls the people to joy. It's a similar situation in Isaiah: the first 11 chapters of the book overflow with judgment and exile, humiliation and Babylonian domination and then suddenly chapter 12 breaks forth in a song of joy. Both texts are rooted in struggle and suffering, even sinfulness and corruption; their song of joy begins as God comes close, when the people are assured of the love of God, and the certainty that a new and long-awaited day will indeed dawn. Their circumstances haven't yet changed, but God is present, God loves them unconditionally, and God promises them beyond the shadow of a doubt that a new day's coming.

Episcopal writer and minister Debie Thomas speaks about joy with these words: "... (Joy) requires that we hold onto two realities at once: the reality of the world's brokenness in one hand, and the reality of God's love in the other. Joy is what happens when we daily live into the belief that God can and will

bridge the gap between the world we long for and the world we see before our eyes. It is a posture, an orientation, a practice. A willingness to sit gently but persistently in the tension of the "not yet," trusting that God's peace will guard our hearts and minds in that in-between place for as long as it takes." ("Rejoice, Always?" *Journey with Jesus*, posted 5 December 2021)

As I was trying to figure out how to talk with you about joy, I wandered back to a piece I wrote and shared with you a year ago in my Advent emails. In one of those, I wrote about a conversation I'd had with someone for whom the full weight of 2020 was sitting menacingly. I wrote, "Isolation, separation from family, the absence of friends and what feels like a total and complete non-observance of Christmas. As we approached the end of our phone call, I heard a small, bone weary voice quietly sing: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart..."

"That was no mockery of an old camp song or the reality of this moment, but the deep, profoundly faithful understanding of what joy is all about. It's not happiness. It's not belly laughs and radiant smiles (not that it has anything against those things). It's not dependent on life going according to plan, or delivering on our every wish. Joy is the knowledge that God's got the whole world held protectively and eternally in a cradling embrace that can never be disrupted. Joy is holding fast to the trust that we are known, we are loved, we are held. That suffering may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning, and we have complete confidence that morning will indeed dawn. ("Joy", *From Where I Walk*, December 17, 2020)

I remember ending that piece of writing wondering what was being born in the black hole of 2020, and now I'd have to add 2021 to that question. A year later, on this Sunday of joy, we still find ourselves living in the midst of turmoil and chaos, as well as a pandemic that would rather mutate than go away; but we also live with a promise, we live in trust and we live with a God who loves us for now and forever, to the moon and back as many times as it takes. We live with a God who invites us, as Isaiah 12 reports, to come with joy to draw water from the wells of salvation. To turn to God trusting that everything necessary for supporting life flows to us from the undeserved goodness of God, to look with anticipation for signs of the new life that are even now coming among us, and to do what we can to participate in the dawning of God's great and glorious new day. And sing with full throat, open heart unrestrained confidence: Joy to the World! Amen.

HYMN No. 151 "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice"

Good Christian friends, rejoice With heart and soul and voice;  
Give ye heed to what we say: News! News! Jesus Christ is born today!  
Ox and ass before Him bow, And He is in the manger now:  
Christ is born today! Christ is born today!

Good Christian friends, rejoice With heart and soul and voice;  
Now ye hear of endless bliss: Joy! Joy! Jesus Christ was born for this!  
He has opened heaven's door, And we are blessed forevermore:  
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!

Good Christian friends rejoice With heart and soul and voice;  
Now ye need not fear the grave: Peace! Peace! Jesus Christ was born to save!  
Calls you one and calls you all To gain His everlasting hall:  
Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!

PRAYER REQUESTS

Art and Doris Fleming, both of whom have had Covid

PASTORAL PRAYER

We are waiting, Jesus; **come and live with us soon.**

Jesus, we are waiting because we know who you are: the Creator of the world, the God who took on human form, the son of Mary, a girl just like any other girl. We are waiting, Jesus; **come and live with us soon.**

Jesus, we are waiting because we have faith in you. We know that we can trust you. We remember that you are good to us, and we thank you for all the good things that you give to us every day. We are waiting, Jesus; **come and live with us soon.**

Jesus, we are waiting here, here in Wallace, throughout the Silver Valley, waiting for you to come into our houses, our streets, our shops and offices, to fill them with your light and peace. We are waiting Jesus; **come and live with us soon.**

Jesus, we are waiting for you to come and change things: to bring health to our sick ones, to comfort those who have lost loved ones, to ease the tensions that divide us from each other; and to turn us around so that we can be your hands and feet, your ears and eyes, in this world that needs you so much. We are waiting, Jesus; **come and live with us soon.** (John Davies, *Candles and Conifers*, page 150)

Hear us as we join together with the words of prayer Jesus taught his friends: Our Father...  
PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

#### OFFERING

I've talked the past couple of weeks about opportunities to give a special Christmas gift for either the Wallace Christmas Fund or the Food Bank – or both. Several of you have responded generously to this invitation, and I want to repeat it one more time. The Christmas Fund raises money and collects needs and wishes for children in our community, and then provides gifts to those who otherwise might have little on Christmas morning. And the Food Bank works throughout the year to provide groceries as well as food vouchers to people in our communities who otherwise would go without. They work hard during the holidays to enlarge the monthly vouchers, in the hope of increasing the sense of celebration for those who have little. If you would like to participate in these offerings, get it to the church this week, marked clearly for how you would like it directed. The Treasurer will write checks next Sunday, so that your gifts will be on their way before Christmas.

This is a season in which we celebrate God's overwhelming generosity to us in coming to live among us in the birth of Jesus, and much of our celebration is marked by generosity as we give gifts and express our love to others. Thank you for the times and ways that your generosity includes the needs and wounds of our community as well as the ministry and operation of our church. Together, we serve God, and together, we build up the ministry of Christ's church. Let us pray.

#### PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

**Thank you for the gifts we have the privilege of sharing in these days. May they cultivate joy and eradicate the fear and despair that accompany not having enough. Activate our own joy also as we give out of gratitude and abundance and let our generosity be contagious beyond this moment. Bless every cent, dollar, minute, hour, skill, talent, mind, and body generously and freely offered to you, gracious God. Amen.**

#### HYMN No. 125 "Joy to the World"

Joy to the world! the Lord is come; Let earth receive her King;  
Let every heart prepare Him room, And heav'n and nature sing,  
And heav'n and nature sing. And heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns; Let men their songs employ;  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy, Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness, And wonders of His love,  
And wonders of His love, And wonders, wonders of His love.

#### BENEDICTION

As we prepare to leave, listen to these words that Paul wrote, not from the middle of a great celebration or from a mountaintop where life looked perfect, but from his prison cell. In Philippians 4:4-7 he wrote: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Go now in peace, and go in joy. Amen.

Many thanks to Gretchen Ehram for the art for tis Sunday of Joy. Used with her permission.