

Kuhn Memorial Presbyterian Church
955 Main Street
Barboursville, West Virginia 25504
Third Sunday in Advent, Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy
December 13, 2020

Prelude

Lighting the Candle of Joy

Robin McComas, Charles and Barrett Seay, with Ellis Ciccolella recording

*Hymn People, Look East, verses 1-3 Eleanor Farjoen, 1881-1965

1. People, look east. The time is near of the crowning of the year.

Make your house fair as you are able,
trim the hearth and set the table.

People, look east and sing today:
Love, the guest, is on the way.

2. Furrows be glad, though earth is bare,
one more seed is planted there.

Give up your strength the seed to nourish,
that in course, the flower may flourish.

People, look east and sing today:
Love, the rose, is on the way.

3. Birds, though you long have ceased to build,
guard the nest that must be filled.

Even the hour when wings are frozen,
God for fledging time has chosen.

People, look east and sing today:
Love, the bird, is on the way.

Prayer

We come, O God, with thanksgiving and praise. Our anticipation grows as we approach the day of Jesus' birth. Open our hearts that we may truly receive the gift of your Son, and know the joy of abundant life with you. Through Christ, who comes to make all things new. Amen.

Scripture Reading Luke 1:39-56

The Morning Message Mary's Song

Once upon a Sunday, in a Pentecostal church, which is typically a little more lively than a Presbyterian church, the preacher got so wound up with the Holy Spirit, joy and excitement just poured out from her and spilled onto the congregation. She was so full of the Spirit, in fact, that she had some left over, and when she stepped down out of the pulpit, she twirled around on the red carpet a few times, pumped her arms in the air, and shouted, “Yes, Lord! Woo-hoo! Woo-hoooo! A-men!”

W. H. Auden once wrote, “When grace strikes you, you have to sing and dance.” I can agree with that.

Today is the third Sunday in Advent. Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of joy. It provides us a reprieve from the quiet reflective days of Advent and cracks the door on what lies ahead. I don’t plan to dance down the aisle at the end of the service, but, I do wonder if we might be missing out on occasions of unrestrained joy.

There seems to be a shortage of joy these days. We are living through a grim time, aren’t we? I don’t have to name all the issues that are complicating life right now. We are all too well aware of them. Ed and I stayed up way too late Tuesday night after we heard news of the explosion at the former Dupont plant. That plant is very close to Cedar Grove, where my husband grew up and where his brother lives. They were on the phone with each other at midnight... because that’s what you do when tragedy strikes so close to home. Just checking in gives us a sense of the peace that passes understanding, even in the throes of tragedy.

Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, writes, “Joy doesn’t depend on what’s going on in the world. This is what makes joy different from happiness, pleasure, or fun. All of those depend on positive conditions...good health, good job, happy family, lots of toys. But the only condition for joy is the presence of God.”

“Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room...or on a Sunday morning at 11:30.”

Think about when you have witnessed this type of joy. It can happen in some unlikely places. Do you remember the Iran hostage crisis? Several American diplomats were taken hostage and subjected to unknown conditions. Attempts to free them had failed. But on Christmas Day, the Rev. William Sloan Coffin, of the Riverside Church in New York City, was granted permission to visit the men and women held captive. Seated at a piano, Bill Coffin led the hostages in singing Christmas carols. As they recalled the words to familiar carols, the expressions on their worn and weathered faces softened. As they sang about peace on earth and good will to all, they

bore witness to Christian hope. They would still be hostages the next day, but that night, it seemed possible that they might sleep in heavenly peace.

Closer to home, it was about seven years ago, when I answered the phone and my daughter was on the other end telling me that I had gotten my wish at long last: she was pregnant. Ed was outside retrieving our mail from the mailbox. It's across the street from our house...and he heard me whooping and hollering so loudly that he said he knew without asking what caused my joyous outburst.

You know what happened next: this news was too good to keep to ourselves... we had to tell someone! And so we did. When grace strikes you, you just have to sing and dance, call your family, and rush out to buy life-sized teddy bears!

When Mary found out she was to have a baby, she started singing, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." When she reached her cousin, Elizabeth's home, she was awed by the mystery of it all, and she intones the song attributed to Hannah, one of the mothers of the Hebrew faith, when she learned she would bear a son, Samuel.

Mary praised God for finding her worthy of the privilege of bearing this child, for bringing down the powerful, lifting up the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things... all game-changers in Mary's day and in ours.

When God's presence breaks in, we can't ignore it. We open our mouths and notes pour out. I was teaching a first grade Sunday School class years ago. When it was time for class to end, the older sister of one of my students came into the room to retrieve her brother. She was singing the sweetest tune. I asked her what it was she was singing. She replied, "I don't know. I just heard it in my heart."

Pure joy. The same joy that prompted unrestrained song from an aged Hannah, a shocked Zechariah, a teenaged Mary, barren Elizabeth, angels in the cold dark night, Simeon and Anna upon Jesus' presentation in the temple...

...You and me and believers everywhere when we are given the word that singing is not a danger to our health any longer.

Then we might just dance down the aisle, singing with all that's in us, "My soul magnifies the Lord!"

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Gracious God, we give thanks today for the gifts of love and life,
for the gift of joy that transcends this season and sustains us year-long,
for the gift of comfort when our joy is dimmed,
for the gifts of mercy, healing, and wholeness,
for the gifts of patience and serenity,
for the gift of hope as we prepare our hearts for the Savior's birth.
As Christ has come to change our world,
we pray that he may be born in us afresh,
and that through the ministry and mission of the faithful of this age
the world may be re-shaped and renewed, and we may see your kingdom emerge among us.
Comfort your people who are in any distress, including those we name in our hearts, strengthen
all caregivers, enable the faithful to persevere, enlighten those who govern that they may protect
and provide for the local and global community.
Usher in your peace, that passes all understanding, and keep our hearts and minds in Christ
Jesus, in whose name we pray, saying, *Our Father...Amen.*

Hymn People, Look East, verses 4 and 5

4. Stars, keep the watch, when night is dim,
one more light the bowl shall brim,
Shining beyond the frosty weather,
bright as the sun and moon together.
People, look east, and sing today:
Love, the star is on the way.

5. Angels, announce with shouts of mirth,
Christ, who brings new life to earth.
Set every peak and valley humming,
with the word, the Lord is coming.
People, look east, and sing today:
Love, the Lord, is on the way.

Blessing

Go now, for you are chosen and sent in the Spirit.
Pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances.
Keep what is good, avoid every kind of evil.
To all in need bear witness that the time is come when yhe Sovereign Lord will save his people.
And may God who gives peace make you holy in every way.
May Christ Jesus clothe you with salvation and victory.
And may the Holy Spirit speak through you with the good news of life everlasting. Amen.
Postlude

Announcements

Weather permitting, and in observance of health and safety precautions, we will hold a Christmas Eve Service of Communion and Light, Thursday, December 24th. You may come to the sanctuary entrance of the church anytime between 7 and 8PM to receive the Sacrament of Communion and celebrate the birth of the Lord of Love.

Please remember to return your pledge card. This helps us prepare the budget for 2021. We are thankful for all gifts given to support the ministry and mission of Kuhn Memorial.