

**Wesley United Methodist Church
December 13, 2020**

**Deck the Halls: Decorating Your Life with What Mattersⁱ
“Deck the Halls With Joy”
Scripture: Luke 1:26-55**

I watched him as he ran across the snow, slipping down to the ground and sliding on the frozen snow. Then he was up repeating this over and over again. Later I watched as he patiently carved into the small mound of snow the plow had left using a piece of ice to break it up. The next day it wasn't as good for body sliding, but there was still much fun to be had. Happy yes, but even more the smiles and laughter were coming from the heart of a joyful child.

An always child now in an adult body was disappointed that her church wasn't having worship inside the building, so she started drawing pictures for members of her family because she didn't want them to be sad. After she had made more than enough for family, she started to make pictures for neighbors. As Covid continued and the number of pictures she drew kept increasing, her mother started to mail them to people in their church. When they had all received pictures, mom started to drop them off in other places. I don't know whether or not everyone received them joyfully, but I do know that the months of drawing and sharing pictures with others came out of a heart of joy of one of God's forever children. She doesn't really understand what is happening, but she very much wanted to share the joy of her life with other people.ⁱⁱ

These are simple stories about living a life of joy when the circumstances of life may not seem joyful. This week our country passed the tragic milestone of more than 3,000 deaths from Covid in a single day. One was the 97-year-old mother of a friend. Each death brought sorrow to someone. Meanwhile, there continues to be controversy over who won the Presidential election more than a month ago. Some electoral officials have been subjected to armed protestors outside their homes while their small children inside are scared.

We may wonder how we can have and share joy in this season, and yet, in this third week of Advent, we proclaim that this is a time of joy. I think it's important to differentiate between joy and happiness. Happiness is, I believe more fleeting. We are

happy when we have fun with someone. Happiness has to do with what is happening. But joy is different.

Joy is not about being happy with our present circumstances. Joy is about being in harmony with the goodness of God and knowing and experiencing God's delight in us. Joy is about knowing Jesus and wanting to share that joy with others.

For us to experience and live with joy, we do not have to wait until the world is more joyful. Most of us realize that when the pandemic is over, there will be other fears and threats to take its place. Joy is a sense of well-being that transcends circumstances. To live a life of joy is a choice. But how do we do that?

Bernie Carbo was a hero to the Boston Red Sox when he hit a clutch 3 run homer in game 6 of the 1975 World Series. Undoubtedly he was happy about this, but that was fleeting. His life, in his words was "totally miserable". He was addicted to drugs, struggling in his marriage and constantly at odds with his manager and coaches. He spent the next few years bouncing from team to team and finally his baseball career came to an end at the age of 32.

Later he was identified by another team member as the person who had introduced him to cocaine. Life went from bad to worse. Finally, he ended up in a hospital in a bed next to a pastor who introduced him to Jesus. Today he travels across the country sharing his story because, as he said, "I want others to know that there is hope. There is a way out of the deadly seduction of abusing drugs. There is a way out of the anger and anguish that life can bring. Not only does Jesus Christ offer the way out, but he also offers the way *in* to a life more joyful and abundant than anyone could imagine."ⁱⁱⁱ

Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes in his daily meditation on Thursday said that "in the rock-paper-scissors of life, Joy cuts sorrow, crushes despair and swallows crud."^{iv} He reminds us that "Joy is the healing of broken hearts, the breaking of chains, the opening of graves, and the coming of God. Christ does not come to make us happy, but to stand with us in the pain of life until joy like a seed rises."

In the Gospel reading for today, we heard the story of Mary's encounter with an angel who told her that she would soon become pregnant and would give birth to the child who would be called the Son of the Most High who she was to name Jesus. This

must have been a shock to Mary, but she said yes. She was the first responder for those of us who seek to emulate Jesus in the world. A devotion I read proclaimed the “Mary was asked to literally carry and deliver the love of God to a planet in dire need of such a thing.”^v

We get to play a similar role in this moment in the story of the planet, a place burdened with sadness and disconnect. This devotional was written last year, but it is even more true this year. Our world is definitely burdened with sadness and in many ways, we are in even more dire need of God’s love than ever before.

As we heard, when Mary then went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth said that when as soon as she heard Mary’s greeting the child in her womb “jumped for joy.” Luke then records words that we have come to know as the Magnificat, which is the first word in the Latin translation of this poem. She begins by proclaiming that with all her heart, she glorifies the Lord. “In the depths of who I am, I rejoice in God my savior.”

There were real issues with Mary being pregnant. Her fiancé, Joseph had the right to have her stoned for adultery. Even if he didn’t, people would undoubtedly talk about her. And since it was her first child, she probably had tons of questions including the one she had asked the angel, “How can this happen?” And yet, despite all of these strange circumstances and likely a whole range of emotions, Mary was also filled with joy. She had been chosen by God to have an important role in the life of her people. Her song is one of praise and thanksgiving anticipating what God is going to do for the world through her son.

Rev. Glenn Mortimer, whose prayer I used during our prayer time, added this important note: “We have been in our pandemic state for going on 9 months now, the same amount of time it takes for a human being to bear a child at full term. In her Magnificat, Mary reminds us that through the pain of childbirth there also comes great joy. It is thus the joy that overrides the pain. There is much pain in our world as we enter our journey through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. The pandemic does not abate just because we put up lights and decorate a tree and sing carols. Mary reminds us of that as well, as her world is also full of pain. However, Mary ... speaks to us words that we need to hear in our present time. These words of comfort for the struggling, the sick, the hospitalized and the recovering. She reminds us that our souls

magnify the Lord when we reach out to help our neighbor and our community to overcome the pain that the world has wrought upon us.”^{vi}

In Mary’s song, she points to a God who can meet our deepest needs. That’s what Joy does. A colleague this week called Mary’s song the “Original Ode to Joy”^{vii}. Joy points to God who can meet our deepest needs with an everlasting contentment and fulfillment that is not dependent upon happy circumstances, but that transcends the conditions of life. Joy points to a God who is with us, who gives us joy, and welcomes us to a home with God, regardless of who we are or have been, and holds out great possibilities for who we can be with God.

In this Advent season, God is still calling us to a new adventure. We may not have much control over the circumstances around us, but we have a lot of control, a lot of choices, about how we will live in those situations. That is especially important for us to remember this year, as the things that we often look forward to at Christmas are not going to happen in the same way. Bill McKibben noted, that “There is no ideal Christmas; only the one Christmas you decide to make as a reflection of your values, desires, affections, and traditions.”^{viii}

May we, today, listen to God’s voice speaking among us in many ways, through creation, through the voices of others, through the actions of those who are showing love. May we, today be inspired to create change. May we find ways to share this love and joy. A forever child shared the deep joy in her life by drawing pictures for others because she didn’t want people to be sad.

God’s joy is contagious. We can celebrate the blessings that have come into our lives. We can celebrate the blessings that are here now. We can celebrate the blessings that we know will come because God is faithful toward us. Joy comes from knowing that God is near and then we are called to share that joy with others, let it well up within us and find a way to release it into a world that desperately needs that joy today.

The third verse of our closing hymn, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” speaks to us now, “And ye, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow, look now! For glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing. O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels

sing.” When our burdens seem crushing, let us rest and listen to the angels message that brings joy to our lives.

Let us pray:

Our loving God, in days that seem so hard, when people are dying in record numbers from Covid, when conflicts abound, you are the only true source of hope, peace and joy in our lives and in our world. Open our hearts to you that we may focus on you and on the joy that you offer us, and then let us go forth to be instruments of that joy, sharing joy with our world. Amen.

ⁱ This Series is based on a series from United Methodists of Greater New Jersey, prepared for this season during a pandemic. Some material is mine, but some ideas also come from this resource abbreviated as GNJ. Other resources influencing and quoted are Adam Hamilton’s book Incarnation and General Board of Discipleship Advent Resource Year B “Company’s Coming”. At times it can be difficult to know exactly which source is influential.

ⁱⁱ Abbott, David In a conversation on 12/09/20

ⁱⁱⁱ Denison, Jim Dr. in “The Daily Article” Dec. 10, 2020.

^{iv} Garnaas-Holmes, Steve. “Unfolding Light” Dec. 10, 2020

^v Pavolvitz, John. Low: An Honest Advent Devotional. Week 1, Saturday, “Carry and Deliver” c.2019

^{vi} Mortimer, Glenn, in the NE Conference Daily Prayer 12/11/2020

^{vii} MacHugh, Pat. In a conversation 12/09/2020

^{viii} Quoted by Diana Butler Bass in “The Cottage” Dec. 9, 2020.