

“... Far as the Curse Is Found”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
on December 13, 2020 – Advent 3
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Luke 1:39-56

Welcome to the Third Sunday of Advent. This Sunday means we are more than halfway to Christmas from our starting point three weeks ago. It is the Sunday in Advent when we celebrate joy. Dear ones, I have to be honest this morning and tell you that I have spent most of this past week wondering how I would ever be able to create a worship service and preach a sermon on the theme of “joy” when there is so much NOT to be joyful about right now. The pandemic rages out of control as hospitals are filling up, and we all know someone personally who has had Covid or is battling it now. Our own dear friend Julie Grillo is at home quarantining at this moment as she recovers from Covid while her dad, with whom she lives, is in Westerly Hospital for treatment of the disease. We are faced with 3000 deaths per day – *3000 deaths per day* – in our country, a number that seems almost impossible to wrap our heads around, yet there it is. Worse than that, this situation will be continuing on until mid-January at minimum. Equally impossible to comprehend is that these 3000 deaths per day have not been the lead news story this past week. No, that has been the unprecedented attempts by the outgoing President to overturn a duly and safely conducted election in order to remain office. Equally incomprehensible is that other elected officials have supported this effort despite the complete lack of evidence of any wrongdoing by election officials anywhere. It has felt this last week like our very democracy is under attack by some of her own and that is both heart-breaking and mind-boggling. Meanwhile people are dying of a disease some still deny exists and potentially millions of our fellow citizens will lose their homes and businesses because our fractured national government has not been able to agree on how, perhaps even if, to help the people who need it most. Again, mind-boggling to me. Heart-breaking to me. Perhaps to you too.

So here we are having arrived at the Sunday in Advent where joy is to be front and center in the church. How are we ever supposed to feel joyful when so very much is going wrong everywhere we look? How are we

supposed to be able to find the energy to look for joy in the middle of this mess? Would we even recognize it if we did see it? Well, I do have to admit there has been some good news amidst all the bad. A Covid vaccine has finally been approved for distribution and will begin to be administered to health care workers and nursing home residents within the next week or so. This is a most hopeful sign that, if we are not yet rounding the Covid corner, we can at least see the turn coming up ahead. And, despite all the post-election shenanigans, our judicial system has held strong in protecting the Constitution even as other governmental leaders have stood up to the assault on our beloved country. There are still a lot of good people, very good and courageous people, working on our behalf in the government. That too is a very positive sign that all will be well as we negotiate this tumultuous time in the life of our country.

But positive is a long way from joyful, isn't it? So, how do we get from where we are – hopeful signs that things are getting better – all the way to where Advent is inviting us to be on this Sunday – all the way to joy? That, dear ones, is indeed a tall order. But, I think we're up to the challenge. Mary certainly was up to the challenge when she accepted the invitation to be the earthly mother of God's son. She had to have been terrified as she was, after all, a young girl engaged to be married but was not yet and here she would be, pregnant with a child not her betrothed's. Yikes! She risked her very life in that moment she agreed to God's plan for it was routine for unmarried, pregnant girls to be stoned to death. She knew this and said yes anyway because, well, how do you say no to God? The dangerousness of her predicament is most likely what prompted her to visit her cousin Elizabeth for a few months, which is the story we read this morning from Luke's Gospel. And guess what? As soon as Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house, joy arrived too. Elizabeth was filled with joy and so was the baby she carried in her own womb. "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy," was Elizabeth's greeting to Mary. You'll remember we heard the story of this baby – Elizabeth & Zechariah's baby – last week, the baby who would be named John. You'll also remember that at this point in time Zechariah had been struck mute by questioning the angel who had come to tell him about his own child to be born. For

Elizabeth to greet Mary with such joy in the midst of her own anxieties must have brought comfort to them both.

We also need to note that Elizabeth's joy for Mary quickly translated into Mary's own joy over her unorthodox situation. Elizabeth says to her, "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." You trusted God, Elizabeth says to her. You believed what God told you would happen. To this Mary responds with her own now joyful response, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Yes, this IS happening to me, Mary says to Elizabeth, continuing on to express just how blessed, how joyful she truly is. What follows is a poem supposedly spoken by Mary as she tells Elizabeth all that she knows will happen as a result of the birth of the child she carries. Her speech, known as the Magnificat, is the first and one of the most beautiful and succinct statements of what would come to be known as the "great reversal" preached and taught by Jesus. "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty," she says of the son in her womb. "The last shall be first and the first shall be last," her son taught to anyone who would listen as he spread his good news to all.

These words of Mary's still make my heart sing every time I read them. And this year, of all years, they are pointing the way to joy for me in these days where joy is in such very short supply. Things are tough, Mary sings and Jesus teaches, but they don't have to remain this way. They won't remain this way, if we can dare as Mary did, to accept God's invitation to do the impossible. And what impossible thing are we being asked to do in this moment? Several, I think. We are being asked to trust that God is in the midst of all we are seeing and experiencing in this moment meaning that even when we feel most alone, we are not. God is here with us, right here and right now, comforting us as we are missing family and friends we can't be with as we are stuck in quarantine and everything that means. God is right here with us, reassuring us through all the medical and research folks working to return our lives to safety from a raging disease. All we need to do is our part – wear a mask, wash our hands, minimize contacts with people outside our households – for just a little while longer. God is here with us, reminding us that there are always bad actors up to self-serving

mischievous, but there are always more good people ready, willing and able to do the right thing. Once again, all we need to do is our part by holding our elected officials responsible for their actions. And, of course, we need to be part of that mass of people who are ready, willing and able to do the right thing when it counts. That, dear ones, you already know. That, dear ones, you already do. Every time you make a call to check on someone, every time you say a kind word to someone who's overwhelmed, all those countless moments when the love of Jesus shines through you – that's how you are doing your part to make the world a better place and joy visible.

So, on this Sunday when joy is to be front and center as we get ready for Christmas, maybe it won't be as difficult to find joy as I feared. After all, joy surrounds us in this beautiful church we so love. The very walls and glass and pews and altar and organ and – just everything – are a tangible expression of the joy and excitement felt by the people who formed this church just 50 short years ago. Some of you were part of that moment and can recall those memories and all the happy and joyful memories since – here in the church and in your lives at home. Dear ones, joy IS here always for the simple reason that it never left. It lives inside each one of us, ready to burst out if we can just let go of our worries and fears that keep it contained. Joy is here because God is good, life is sweet and we are right here in the middle of it. Christmas is coming! Joy to the world!

Speaking of which, curious thing about this beloved Christmas carol which is our featured song for this week. Written by the most prolific hymn writer of the 17th century, Isaac Watts, it was most definitely not written as a Christmas carol. Watts wrote it as a paraphrase of Psalm 98 in order to summarize in poetic language his own personal Christology, or what he believed about Jesus as Christ. Typical of his time in history and his role as what was known as a “non-conforming” minister, Watts did not find any value in the Psalms other than what they had to say when read through the lens of the coming of Jesus as the Savior of the world. In other words, Watts read the Psalms and all of the Old Testament as having value only as background material for the coming of Jesus as the Savior of mankind. That's why for Watts, this hymn was never about the birth of Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem. No, it was always about the Second Coming of Christ to take to heaven all those we repented of their sins (the “curse” so named

by God and connected with Adam and Eve in Genesis). That this was Watt's intent is visible in the first phrase of the first verse: "Joy to the world! The Lord IS come!" The joy Watts is describing is because Jesus has finally returned. Dear ones, this means this beloved Christmas carol – the most popular and beloved carol in North America – is not about Christmas at all. How crazy is that! https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joy_to_the_World
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-joy-to-the-world>

But we've made this carol about Christmas, haven't we? And, dear ones, we are not wrong. Just as Isaac Watts only saw Jesus in the psalms about David, so we see the Baby Jesus in Watts' own words. And why shouldn't we? He's right there! "Let every heart prepare him room" because there wasn't any room at the inn. "Let all their songs employ" as the angels sang the good news to the shepherds over "the fields and floods, rocks hills and plains." And those very shepherds after seeing the babe in the manger, continued to "repeat the sounding joy" of the angels' good news. And this sweet babe would grow into the man who would "no more let sin and sorrows grow." Instead "he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found," the curse of selfishness and disregard to those most in need. Then finally this Jesus "rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove" – prove that they can do the right thing, that they can care for the least of these, that people matter more than money and power. Of course this carol is about Christmas, whether that's what Watts intended or not. Joy to the world!!! Yes, Jesus, yes! Show us what we yet may do to make it so. We're listening... We're trying. Amen.