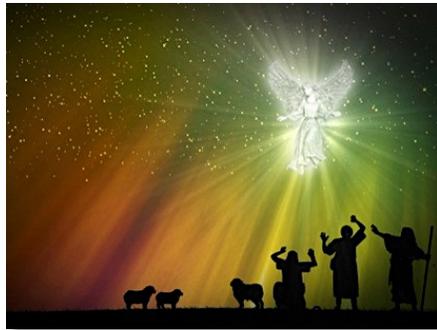


## **“Joy For Everyone”**

Rev. David Gregory

December 16, 2018

Third Sunday of Advent



### **First reading**

*Joy is Not Made to Be a Crumb*

Mary Oliver

*If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate.*

*Give in to it.*

*There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.*

*We are not wise, and not very often kind.*

*And much can never be redeemed.*

*Still, life has some possibility left.*

*Perhaps this is its way of fighting back,*

*that sometimes something happens better than all the riches  
or power in the world.*

*It could be anything,*

*But very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins.*

*Anyway, that's often the case.*

*Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty.*

*Joy is not made to be a crumb.*

### **Second reading**

Luke 2:8-10

*The Message, by Eugene Peterson*

*There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, world-wide: a Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."*

This was a special morning in Albany, New York, for a sister-congregation of ours by the name of Journey United Church of Christ. It was founded a decade ago as a church that would always be on the move. They've never owned property, choosing to fund mission and service instead of real estate. Their founding minister, my close friend and colleague Sandy Damhof, has only ever worked part time. In fact, there are now three part-time ministers supporting teams of lay people—middle aged and younger—who do much of the work of ministry. It is a new model for ministry, and it's not for everyone; but in Albany, it's working. It's a nimble operation. It has become one of the more successful new churches in a region that tends to close congregations rather than open new ones. This morning they have begun services in the sixth place they have called home. They started in a bar, where they used to clear the beer bottles to create a worship space. Then they moved to the back room of a dental office. When they outgrew that, they rented space in a Shriner's hall, then a hotel ballroom, an empty loft, and today they moved into a school building.

You may hear more about Journey UCC in the coming year, but that's not my purpose this morning. Rather, I want to highlight a tradition that exists in this very non-traditional community. About this time each year they hold what is known as a "Blue Christmas" service. It's usually held near the solstice, and it is specifically designed to be a spiritual expression for those who may not feel very joyful during the holiday. It is meant as a service of inclusion for those for whom the holidays will heighten a sense of loss.

So, why, you might ask, in this season of joy, would we take time to feel sad? Isn't that counter-productive? And, really, to even talk about sadness on the third Sunday in Advent when we light the candle of JOY, wouldn't we be better off to cheer each other up, rather than be reminded of our losses? Don't be such a downer! Isn't it more in keeping with the season to get out there on the hillsides with the shepherds, the angel, the bright lights with everyone singing the good news of great joy which shall be for everyone? I mean, if someone doesn't feel like celebrating all of that, we'll just make them happy anyway, right? Isn't this pink candle of joy supposed to cheer us up? Shouldn't the third Sunday of Advent really be a pep rally to carry us through to a new year filled with new energy and hope?

As I speak these words, my thoughts take me back twenty-one years to Christmas week in 1997 when I gathered up my two teenaged sons and drove them to Ohio for one last visit with my mother, their much-beloved grandmother, who was entering her final stages of ovarian cancer. About seven weeks later I returned to Ohio to spend my final week with her, and having said my own good-byes I returned to Rochester to await a phone call. And the call came on the eve of my 41st birthday.

The next time Christmas came around, I didn't feel like celebrating. The next year felt the same way, and so did the year after that. And then there was my birthday which came around each year to wordlessly remind me of one of my saddest moments. "Come on! Cheer up! Stop dwelling on it," came the advice of any number of well-meaning friends. "Raise a glass of Christmas cheer. Come to this party, or that event. Go see a movie. Sing some carols. Snap out of it." But I couldn't, at least not for a while.

Joy is a lovely thing, and good news is always welcome, but we all know the human condition is one of joy and sorrow, light and shadow, good news and bad. So, what is this season of joy supposed to be about if it's not about putting on a good face and pretending to be happy, or faking it until you make it?

Two days ago we found ourselves wandering around Target, which is much easier to do these days, thanks to Amazon. As I looked around the store I remarked how I just don't need anything. We have food to eat, clothing to wear, and a roof over our heads. Immediately my mind went to the survivors of the recent fire in a place ironically known as Paradise. I wondered how they might feel about the happy pink candle this morning. I thought of those families who lost homes they had worked so hard for, or beloved pets, or even human family members. For them this morning, if there is joy to be had, it comes from a far deeper place in the soul, more grounded than holiday cheer, and made recognizable this year only by contrast.

We cannot always be happy, and the simple fact that it's Christmas doesn't automatically change that. What we can do, however, is find some small piece of joy, even if it's just in seed form. A seed can be planted and watered, nurtured and tended to, and if we get it into the right soil, it will bear fruit in the coming days. We cannot always be happy during the holidays, but we can always find some small piece of joy, which when planted and watered like a seed in the soil, bears fruit in the coming days.

In that wonderful Mary Oliver way of saying it, "Joy is not made to be a crumb." Crumbs are swept off the table and eventually out of the house, too small to be detected, too insignificant to provide any nourishment. The big picture, then, is of a feeling called *joy*, that when you suddenly and unexpectedly feel it, you just give into it. This seed that we plant is life's way of fighting back when all seems lost. And when you feel it and give in to it, "whatever it is," she says, "don't be afraid of its plenty."

In Stone Soup this week, we spent much of the time exploring what we mean by the term "Divine Spirit." The bottom line is that we still don't know what we mean by "Divine Spirit." Some call it energy. Some call it consciousness. Some call it God. Some don't call it at all. But whatever "it" is, I believe this sacred Spirit, holy spirit, if you will, is present in our happiness and in our sadness, in our pleasure and in our pain, in our times of plenty and in our times of want, in our health as well as our sickness. It's this energy we call life—that which breathes us and beats our hearts and is always here. Since we do not know exactly what to call it, let's for today call it Joy. A joy that may be inexpressible, that may defy human comprehension, but exists deep inside us, somewhere in the soul, planting us in the soil in such a way that as the seasons come and go, we will be just fine.

May it be so.