

Advent 3 December 13, 2020

One of the joys of living in Vermont for me has been clear night skies, so that I can see stars, planets, meteorites and even the occasional satellite passing overhead. Having spent over three decades in New York City, the light pollution made star gazing impossible, so it is a true gift to look into the dark Vermont night sky. Just after I came here in 2012, I was able to view the Transit of Venus, when Venus crosses the face of the Sun, an event which won't happen again until December 11, 2117, so I don't imagine I'll catch the next one! Over the past few months I've seen Mars rising in it's glory in the evening sky, a particularly bright scene as it is at it's closet point to our orbit. Also, for the past few months I've watched Jupiter and Saturn rising in the evening sky and converging day by day until the "Great Conjunction" on December 21st, which will not occur again until November 2040. Because both planets are also at a close point to our orbit, which has not happened since 1623, these planets are particularly bright in the sky. A couple of nights ago, the sky cleared and there was a superb view as the gap between these two giant planets narrows. In the midst of a year with so many ugly and difficult situations on our globe, the deaths due to the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, the pitched partisan battles in our own nation, I am grateful to be able to look up once in a while to lift my vision upon the strife and to marvel in the beauty and majesty of the heavens. It is a sheer joy, simple and breathtaking all at once.

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, as we join together in worship this day, your word of hope comes to us; may this word be our joy and prayer in the days to come. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

We have come to the Third Sunday of Advent, a Sunday I've always referred to as "Stir up Sunday," because of the Collect appointed for the day which we will pray together in a few minutes, "Stir up your power, O Lord and with great might come among us..." I've always loved that image of God's power being stirred up, agitated and shaking things up in our world. At Bible Study earlier this week, though I was reminded by Nancy Hanson of another aspect of this prayer, though. As Nancy reminded me, before the 1979 Book of Common Prayer we now use, this prayer was formerly used on the Last Sunday before Advent, and that was the time to "stir up" the Christmas pudding, a fruit and nut delicacy, that would be ready by Christmas, five weeks later. Another reason to love this "Stir Up Sunday," this Third Sunday of Advent!

But before I get too lost in “visions of sugar plums,” and think too much about the Christmas pudding Elizabeth has prepared, let’s pull back to the lessons at hand: in the midst of this long, dark winter of the pandemic, when about 3,000 die each day in our nation, so that Covid-19 is now the leading cause of death in the United States, in the midst of a time of racial and political division we have not seen since the civil rights protests and the Vietnam War era, today we hear over and over again the word of joy in the scriptures. The prophet Isaiah speaks of greatly rejoicing, exulting in God; in the Psalm, we hear of shouts and songs of joy, that even those who go out weeping will come again with joy; Paul urges his sisters and brothers in Thessalonica to rejoice always, and finally, in Mary’s song, the Magnificat, that Beth Hilgartner sang so beautifully for us, Mary testifies that her spirit rejoices in God her savior. So much joy being stirred up here, rejoicing and exulting, this is the backdrop of our Advent celebration this morning. That sheer, simple joy that I experience outdoors peering up into the night sky is not far from the joy of the Advent season in our church. There is something almost childlike about it: a joy in the wonder of things beyond our simple existence. Now, as I mentioned, our earthbound lives are difficult to bear, especially now in the midst of the pandemic, so simple joys seem to be something that should be deeply treasured, yet also as elusive as unicorns.

It would seem that such talk of joy, especially in the depths of the long, dark winter and the pain we see around us: that as Governor Scott announced on Friday evening, certain categories of unemployment benefits and some of the levels of payments will be terminated in a week, just a few days before Christmas. The Federal moratorium on evictions is set to expire at the end of the month as well. And of course, as much as it is hard to believe, the prospect of more Federal relief seems to be a dimming prospect as each day goes by. Yes, the times are dire and bleak. But the words we hear from Isaiah, from the Psalmist and from the apostle Paul, words of joy and rejoicing, these words were spoken in times just as dire and bleak as these days we now face: Isaiah and the Psalmist have come through the exile of the people of Israel, a period of generations in captivity in Babylon, torn from their homes and the lives they knew. Paul’s sisters and brothers in Thessalonica had experienced brutal combat and the unrelenting oppression of the Roman Empire. And then, of course, there’s Mary. A young woman in an occupied land, a poor woman shunted to the edges of society, lowly, most likely hungry and undernourished, forgotten and overlooked. But for Isaiah, the Psalmist, for Paul and even for a nobody like Mary, joy is not a far off, elusive unicorn, joy is not an

unobtainable object, far off, so far off. No, for each of them God has entered their lives: God comes to them, even in the most desperate place, God comes to them and joy, deep joy and exultation spontaneously spring forth. Proclaiming the greatness of God, like those who dream, God's spirit of power transforms and overcomes the sadness, the doubt, the beat-downness. Touched by God, given God's assurance, Isaiah, the Psalmist, Paul and Mary rejoice, sing out in joy and proclaim God's greatness in God's loving kindness, God's close care in their lives. In a most unexpected way, in a most unexpected place, God is with them and this joy is deep and clear.

But there is a special characteristic to this Biblical joy we hear this morning. The testimony in John's Gospel about John the Baptist is about the power that God has to transform our lives. John the Baptist saw the problems of his day, corrupt leaders, many suffering and lost, a nation which had strayed from its path. But John sees that God's power will set the pathway straight, will remove the obstacles and once again call us back into a relationship with God that overcomes the fear and loss of our present time. John sees that this power of God is coming into the world, a power that just like that prayer appointed for this day says, God's power will stir things up, a powerful stirring and shaking that will bring about a new world for us. For John, this power is coming into the world, so that corrupt leaders and deep suffering will be put to flight. But for John as well, this is happening now: God's bountiful grace comes to each of us, bountiful grace that brings us a deep joy by living into the loving kindness and care of God. This transforms and changes our world, yes, but it also stirs up something deep within me, and I very much hope and pray something deep within you is stirred up as well. This love of God, coming into the world in Jesus, a love that brings the change we need, that is powerful enough to create all that is and that is now powerful enough in our time to recreate, to change our lives and our world. And here, here is the thing once more most unexpected, in a time when it feels all too often like many things are coming apart, at a time when it keeps seeming like at any time everything is coming apart at the seams, here now once again Jesus is coming to us: God's promise made to us and to our spiritual ancestors is coming once more into our world and into our lives. The God who bears up the lowly, the God who sees a young, outcast, poor woman and sees that her life can be the way that God's love comes into our world, her life and be transformed to bring the fulness of God's love into world, a light to lighten the darkness and a bountiful grace to bring us a deep joy that brings us to undertake the

actions to make this love and grace a growing presence in our lives and in the life of our world.

Today, on this “Stir Up Sunday,” this time we are called together to pray, this is also a time we are called to help each other and to help lead our world, our neighbors, into the fulness of joy and peace. Yes, I know, especially difficult when we cannot be present with each other in our world, but we reach out with our spirits, that deep place where God reaches out to us just as God reached to Mary, to Paul, to the Psalmist and to Isaiah, bringing the divine spirit of love to each of them and to us, a spirit that brings joy through the power of God’s never-failing loving kindness. As John the Baptist stood at the bank of the chilly Jordan River, John testified and showed the power of that love going to us. Today, as we continue in this Advent Season like no other, each sheltering in our homes to stay safe and to control the spread of the deadly coronavirus, today this same joy is present to you and me, for that same power of God’s bountiful grace is coming to our world and to our lives as well. And so, as Paul told his sisters and brothers almost two thousand years ago, today those same words animate our lives and our world, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all things, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you,” Thanks be to God for this bountiful grace in our lives and thanks be to Christ for the power of this Spirit of Love coming to you and to me. Amen.