

Worship with McClure United Church

~ 3rd Sunday in Advent ~

December 13, 2020

Welcome & Announcements

Welcome to the worship of God with McClure United Church... we are so glad you are journeying with us through this Advent season as we continue to step into the mystery and awe of God's dreams for us... and for the world as we wait and prepare for the birth of Jesus.

It is our prayer and hope that during this time you will find something that will touch and nurture and need within you – that you will experience the amazing love of God and feel connected to this community of faithful followers of Christ... we worship on our own, in our own space and in our own time – but we continue to be intimately connected – that's the power of God's love.

Now I do have a few announcements to share with you today.

Advent Prayer Tree

Some of you have already stopped by and added your prayers to our Advent Prayer Tree and I hope others will find some time to add your own prayer requests. You are invited to bring a strip of fabric, ribbon or string and tie it to the Tree (right in front of the main doors of the church building) as a symbolic gesture of offering your prayer. When you stop by to tie your fabric, pause for a moment to share your prayer and offer a prayer for this community as we travel this Advent journey of hope, peace, joy and love. And.. if you have extra Christmas decorations laying around, consider bringing the by and decorate the trees and shrubs outside of Amy McClure House – we'd love to create a festive view for the residents to look at.

Christmas Cookie Sale

If you are donating baked goods, please drop them off at the Church on Tuesday, December 15th, 9–10:30AM. For those picking up their order, please do so at the Church on Tuesday, December 15th, 4–5:30PM.

For both drop-off and pick-up, masks must be worn. Use the east entrance nearest to the Church office. Proceeds will go to general revenue for McClure United Church. Thank you for participating!

Advent Concert

“So That Our Joy May Be Complete”: An Advent Concert Celebration is tonight! Living Skies Regional Council is excited to offer a wonder-filled virtual evening of music & story for the entire UCC family. Co-hosted by Lorne Calvert & Lindsay Mohn, the evening features music provided by Sacred Sounds Worship Band, a Christmas narrative from Jim Tenford, and production support from Cheri Uthe of Faith Productions. Ticket proceeds go directly to UCC Communities of Faith (congregations) & other UCC Ministries throughout the Living Skies Region. When you buy your ticket, simply indicate the specific Community of Faith or Ministry that you would like to support.

Christmas Eve

Please join us for one (or all) of our online Christmas Eve services on December 24th:

- 5pm - Virtual Pageant
- 7pm - Lessons & Carols
- 9pm - Zoom Communion

Connection links will be provided the week prior to Christmas Eve.

The 5PM and 7PM lessons will be recorded and available for later viewing on YouTube and Facebook.

Zoom Connections

Friday mornings at 10AM. A time for our McClure Community to share information, discuss issues and connect with each other via Zoom. For more information, please visit our website or contact Laura at (306) 291-5838 or by email at laura@mcclureunitedchurch.org.

That is all for announcements today. Let us enter now into our time of worship.

Advent Song “Dream a Dream” (Annalise Reinhart)

Advent Candle Lighting (Dani, Brynlee & Asher Danielson)

Opening Prayer/Call to Worship

Creator God, Scripture is flooded with dream-like images:
the lion lying down with the lamb,
justice rolling like a mighty river,
swords being beaten into plowshares,
the prisoner being set free, good news to the oppressed,
the whole world rejoicing.

To our human ears, there are times when these words can sound like
nothing more than a far-off dream or pure fantasy.

But you have taught us through the birth and life of Jesus
that to dream is to hope,
and to hope is to imagine,
and to imagine is to wonder,
and to wonder is to believe,
and to believe is to live and breathe for your promised day.

So, give us the strength to listen as we dream, O God.

For deep down, we know your words are the very thing we need to rejoice
once more. Amen.

Hymn O What a Wonderful Gift (Shirley Blackburn with granddaughter
Lucie)

Scripture

Luke 1:46-55 (Gillian Epp)

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Reflection

Advent joy!

I'm working on it... I really am.

I think every year, all year, many of us have to be intentional and diligent about nurturing joy – in ourselves... in others... in the world

This year perhaps we're more honest about the struggle because... well... we're in the middle of a pandemic so there's something quite tangible to blame for the struggle.

But really.. joy is just hard.

Now that may sound a bit like an oxymoron. Joy is joy... shouldn't it be easy?

Well... actually.. no.. it shouldn't be.

Happiness... that's easier. Happiness, I believe, is more of an external thing. And at this time of the year – the temptation to buy happiness is all around us. Turn on the tv, radio, social media or just walk into a store and most of what you see will grab your hope... your dream... of happiness. And buying new things, or joining new programs, will bring you some sense of happiness... at least for a little while... whether it's a new outfit, the perfect home decoration, a nice meal or a bottle of wine, you can get happy pretty easily but that nice tingly, warm feeling doesn't often last, does it?

Joy, however, doesn't always come easily to some of us and I'd say this year for more of us than usual.. as we are separated from our loved ones,

from the things we like to do to keep our minds, bodies and spirits active.... as we listen to report after report about rising numbers and the death toll grows each day. And for those who are keenly aware of the inequalities.. of the pain and suffering... in the world.... Well – how can we be joyful when so many are suffering?

I think being joyless is actually pretty tempting – pretty easy in this world. Being joyless is simple, it doesn't take any effort at all. Its easy to dwell in hopelessness – to look for the negative, the annoying, the failing that is all around us. When you're living in joylessness you don't really need to do anything – just dwell it in. It doesn't necessarily feel very good – but it isn't supposed to because “feeling good”.. like really feeling good – that is joy. And joy is hard.

Joy takes commitment... it takes perseverance... and it takes a whole lot of faith – and hope and trust in God's dream for us and for the world.

And that brings us to the story of Mary.

In the scripture we heard a few moments ago... an angel comes to Mary and tells her that she is pregnant in the most unconventional of ways. Immediately Mary gets up and goes to her cousin Elizabeth's house. Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist, and when Mary enters the house the baby leaps up in her womb and Elizabeth knows immediately that something amazing has happened to Mary.

And Mary turns to her and says these words... known now as the Magnificat: “My souls magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Now I can imagine a whole lot of responses to a young woman... a girl really... discovering that she was pregnant... new delivered by an angel. I can imagine disbelief, fear, anger, denial. And I wouldn't blame her at all for any of that. And, Mary likely did feel all those things but in this story we see that somewhere in all of whatever she is feeling, she was also feeling joy.

“My spirit rejoices in God”.

To rejoice is an expression of joy.

As I was preparing for this reflection I couldn't help but feel... curious... that on this Sunday, the Sunday we focus on joy, that the scripture passage is about a teenage mother-to-be in crisis. She was young, she was poor and she was pregnant with a baby that wasn't her soon to be husband's. Oh my goodness... she must have been absolutely terrified. Nothing in her world would ever be the same again.

This has been a hard hear... very hard.... impossibly hard for some. I have yet to speak to someone who hasn't been impacted by the pandemic in some way... and that would be enough, more than enough, but that's not all that's been going on... if you listen or read the news for a good part of the year what wasn't related to covid was about intense racism and racial violence or about political tension and dishonesty. I had to look really hard to find "good news" stories in an effort to find balance... to find a little bit of joy. So if you are feeling worried, stressed, depressed, angry, frustrated... I understand.

And that's why this year, more than most, joy is so important. To find or cultivate joy when all of this craziness is going on around us... is an act of resistance. Like Mary... standing there terrified and uncertain... telling her cousin this crazy and confusing news, and still being able to say "rejoice".

Oh this story gives me so much hope. Mary's joy gives me hope. And it also reminds me that joy is not the same as happiness. I can't imagine that Mary was happy about everything that was going on for her... about the way that her life had suddenly changed... about what people were probably thinking... saying... about her and about Joseph. She couldn't have been happy... but yet she rejoiced.

How was she able to do that? To sing her praises to God... to see herself as "favored"?

It was her faith... it was her hope and trust in God's dream for her... for her son.... and for the world.

That couldn't have been easy... but it was possible. Possible because that joy was rooted somewhere deep inside – so deep that even when things around her started to become hard... confusing... scary... the joy remained.

I've heard joy referred to before as "resistance".

Joy.... rejoicing.. especially in the midst of all kinds of things that do not make you very happy.... Is an act of resistance.

Thinking about acts of resistance I was reminded of one of my favourite Christmas stories “How the Grinch stole Christmas”.

“Every who down in Who-ville liked Christmas a lot, but the Grinch who lived just north of Who-ville did not.”

The Grinch hated Christmas... all of it – the singing, the presents... the whole celebration. So he came up with a very dark plan to go into town at night and steal Christmas.... to ruin it for all those annoyingly joyful little Whos.

And that’s exactly what he did.

The next morning he watches and waits for the Whos to wake up so he can enjoy watching their devastation.

But... that’s not what happens... instead, he hears singing.

Happy, loving, joy-filled singing.

It didn’t matter to the Whos that they didn’t have a tree or presents or all the decorations.... It didn’t matter what the Grinch tried to take away from them – Christmas came anyway.

The Grinch is stunned.

“Maybe Christmas”, he thought “doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.”

Grinches in our world don’t understand real joy... or maybe they do understand the concept of real joy but something in their lives has caused them to believe that they just can’t get a piece of it.

And, sadly, when someone is feeling grinchy, they may want to take someone else’s joy away from them... but they can’t. They might be able to take the things that bring happiness – and that’s not right at all.... but no matter how much someone ... or some circumstance of life... may seem like they are trying to take your joy – they can’t.

Not if its rooted in you – rooted in your faith and in your own hope for God’s dream... the dream God has for you – has for each one of us – and for the world.

Joy is resistance.

Joy is how we keep singing in the midst of the worry... of fear... and of pain. Nothing disempowers a grinch more than joy.

When a grinch is being mean – hurtful, abusive, oppressive – we definitely do not excuse it.... we don't allow it to go on without intervention.... But we also do not let it have its way.

Instead, we connect ourselves again to God's dream - roots tightly wound within us... firm, steady, strong... we allow the joy to sprout up from within and we hold onto our commitment to let the light of Mary's child shine in and us and through us.

So we need to work at strengthening those roots...
Its work... but it is work well worth it.
Its not complicated work – but it is also not easy.

So please... this season... and beyond... don't settle for happiness. You are worth so so so much more than that. Connect with your community... your loved ones... in whatever way you are able – phone, video, email, letters and cards.... Find joy together. Live in this complicated, strange and stress-filled world and look for the moments... the places... the people... where joy is breaking through.
Open your heart wide and let the joy of Christ's birth really fill it up... wrap it, hold it... ground it...
Do this and you will have a Merrier Christmas...
Amen.

Hymn Mary's Song (Shirley Blackburn)

Prayers of the People/Lord's Prayer

God of Joy, one of the things we are missing most this Advent is singing. Singing with each other. We miss Elin at the piano and Shirley at the Organ, we miss Tamara and Celeste the sacred sounds band and the choirs. We miss hearing all the special offerings and the cantata with all the wonderful guests. We miss belting out O come O come Emmanuel and chapping about trees. Remind us that when Mary sang her song of faith she was alone, standing in the glow of disturbing and mysterious news.

Remind us this year especially, to sing our songs of faith for they remind us of who we are and who we are as you people.

Creative and playful God, we give you thanks for the joy that is part of our lives. We celebrate and give thanks for: children who giggle and count down the sleeps until Christmas, people who find joy in searching out the perfect present, those who though in a hurry, still smile and say excuse me, and for the many stressed employees who continue to greet us warmly behind their masks and who politely ask us to sanitise our hands or put on our masks. We are thankful for heartfelt warm wishes, early Christmas cards, zoom parties, smiling crinkles at the edge of people's eyes and a friendly nod. We offer thanks for news that comes from friends and family, email greetings and all the things that bring both smiles and remind us of our connection even in times of physical distancing.

God of laughter and love we give thanks for the moments of joy brought into our lives and for the ability to recognize this joy. For the moments of joy we bring to others we offer our heartfelt thanks. We are grateful as well for the transforming birth of Jesus Christ both in the Bethlehem stable and in our hearts.

We are aware, ever present God, that joy does not fill everyone's heart during this season. Many find this time of year difficult, loss and grief cast shadows, illness darkens the glow of candles, worry about being able to provide food and shelter for our loved one's saps strength. God, of Jesus who was born an outcast in a stable, be present with all who struggle through this season. Be with those who are suffering illness and with all who care for them and worry about them. Then give us the energy to offer our love, prayers and support. Help us reach out generously with compassion and help us to understand and remember their pain, in the midst of our celebrating - we pause now in silence offering our personal prayers of concern.

(silence)

God of transformation and new life help us to be instruments of change in your world - in this season of hope, peace, joy, love and light, and always, knowing that through our words, our prayer, and our action we make a difference.

As disciples of the babe of Bethlehem, Jesus the Christ we pray:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into

temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Sung Blessing Hope Shines Forth (Kristie Elliott)

Blessing

In Advent, we step into the mystery and awe of God's dreams and pray they shape our reality.

God invites us to dream together -

And as we continue to consider God's dreams for us and for the world, lets ponder as well how we might be messengers of good news to the world, planting seeds of life that bring joy in abundance to a world in need.

May the candle of joy burn warm in our hearts today and every day.
Amen.