

The background of the image is a deep blue night sky filled with numerous small, faint stars. A single, exceptionally bright star is located in the upper left quadrant, emitting a prominent vertical light ray that extends downwards across the frame. At the bottom of the image, the dark, silhouetted outlines of evergreen trees are visible against the horizon.

Hope  
Peace  
Joy

# *Third Sunday of Advent*

## **December 13, 2020**

**Prelude:**

**Devotion on St Thomas**

**Dennis Janzer**

### **Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:**

Oh the joy of gathering together to worship the one true God! We are able to set aside what divides us to lift our voices in unity to praise our glorious King! There is none that compare to him, none that are like our God! We are overcome by his beauty and stand in awe of his miraculous works. Though we have done nothing to deserve his grace, he has rescued us and saved us from our sinful ways. For that we will sing. With all that is in us, we will worship the one true God! Come now and worship.

### **Opening Hymn:**

#### **“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”**

Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!  
Of Jesse’s lineage coming as those of old have sung.  
It came, a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter, when half-spent was the night.

Isaiah ‘twas foretold it, the Rose I have in mind:  
With Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind.  
To show God’s love aright she bore to men a Savior, when half-spent was the night.

This Flower, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air,  
Dispels with glorious splendor the darkness everywhere.  
True man, yet very God, from sin and death now save us, and share our every load.

### **A Time of Prayer:**

God of angels and sheep, of the poor and meek, God of bright shining stars and babies who sleep, how wonderful you are, how thrilling is your story. In this moment, in these few days before the celebration:

- Quiet us to hear where new life is struggling to be born.
- Cause the angelic choruses and familiar carols to lift our hearts and renew our joy.
- Slow our rush so we may hug the child we are fussing for and keep us disciplined in a time of excess.
- Fill our hearts more than our stockings.
- May your light penetrate deeply to the wounds we carry and let some healing be born in us.

Strengthen your church to sing with clarity and reassurance that Christ was born to save. Amen.



## **The Lighting of the the Candle of Joy:**

Advent is a season of joy. We celebrate the coming of the Christ child with parties and gifts, special decorations and new clothes. We gather with family and friends for special events. We honor long-held traditions. We also reach out to those whose joy is dimmed in this season. Today we light the third candle, the Candle of Joy, for Christ, our joy, is coming.

With the psalmist, let us exult: “Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures evermore” (Psalm 16:9, 11).

The joy of the Lord is our strength! Let us bask in the radiance of Christ’s presence as we light the Candle of Joy.

Let us pray - Holy God, true joy will never be found in tinsel and colored lights and even less in the excesses of this season. True joy is found in you and in you alone. Thank you for the gift of Joy Incarnate. Thank you for the Spirit who manifests your joy in our hearts all year long. Come, Lord Jesus. Bring us the gift of your joy and your life. Amen.

## **Lighting of Candles of the Menorah:**

We join with our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith to commemorate the miracle of light that occurred in the 2nd century BCE when the Maccabees defeated their oppressors. During this time, they were celebrating the rededication the temple from the desecration to the temple caused by their oppressors. After the temple had been cleaned they sought to celebrate the new light and new freedom. The oil supply was only sufficient to light the candle for one night, but miraculously they were able to light the candles for eight nights. We light these candles to remember the new freedom that was received by their liberation and the miracles we receive through the liberation granted to us by God.

## **A Reading from the Scriptures:**

## **Psalm 126 (NIV)**

- 1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion  
we were like those who dream.
- 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
‘The Lord has done great things for them.’
- 3 The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we rejoiced.
- 4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,

like the watercourses in the Negeb.  
5 May those who sow in tears  
reap with shouts of joy.  
6 Those who go out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
carrying their sheaves.

**Musical Interlude:**                      **Coventry Carol**

**The Message:**                              **“Joy on Display”**

In a survey of more than 700 subjects, Kathy Caprino — a senior contributor at Forbes, marriage and family therapist, and career coach — asked respondents to identify what they most desperately wanted in life. The question was: “If you could say in one word what you want more of in life, what would that be?”

Think about that for a moment. How would you respond?

The number 1 response was happiness. Joy came in at number 5. Money — which, one would assume, would help you grab number 1 or number 5 — was number 2. Other answers were freedom, peace, balance, fulfillment and confidence.

The participants in the survey clearly identified a distinction between happiness and joy. Usually those who discuss this distinction say that happiness is a form of contingent joy. Happiness, according to this line of thought, is a momentary feeling of elation stimulated by some external yet positive event that has occurred in one’s life.

Joy, on the other hand, is a stream that flows deep and steady and is not affected too much by whatever turbulence may be roiling the surface of one’s life. Caprino’s audience would rather have happiness than joy. They’d rather have freedom than joy; peace than joy. Most importantly, they’d rather experience episodic bursts of giddy insanity than anything else.

Preachers tend to laud joy as a more commendable emotion than happiness. We get all excited and happy when something surprisingly positive happens to us. We tap out text messages flooded with emoticons or send GIFs of a celebrity fist-pumping. It doesn’t take much. We win \$5 on a scratch-off lottery ticket and go crazy. A parking spot magically appears. Your spouse discovers the on/off switch on the Dirt Devil. Your 15-year-old daughter leaves the house, and then returns and says, “You were right, mom or dad, turns out I do need my jacket.”

Yup. We’re insane with happiness. Sheer bliss. Life is good!

Sadly, such happiness is tied too much to the desires and pleasures of the flesh, so the argument runs. We should yearn for the kind of contentment that is true happiness. And what is the name of true happiness? Joy. Following this line of thinking, we should emulate the joy that one could have, say, if one were cloistered in a monastery or nunnery, sleeping on a straw mat, and sipping stone soup from an earthenware crockery bowl. Achieve joy then, and you’ll have not only joy, but mindfulness, inner peace, enlightenment, sanctification and a slew of other doctrinal mysteries we can’t explain.

Temporal and carnal happiness is often frowned upon as an emotion less than sanctifying, and bordering on worldliness. This attitude is by and large a gift from our Puritan forebears who, according to H.L. Mencken, were stricken with “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.”

On Gaudete Sunday, or Joy Sunday, the distinction between happiness and joy — a useful distinction, by the way — is problematic, because in our Psalms text, the word “happiness” is not used. In these brief six verses, the words “joy” or “rejoiced,” however, are used four times.

The problem? This joy about which the psalmist writes is clearly contingent joy, or what we today typically call happiness. Uh-oh! Let’s take a look.

Back then ...

The psalmist remembers a time when the Lord had restored “the fortunes of Zion.” Perhaps the memory is a recent one, given that this is probably a postexilic psalm and the author is referring to the recent return of many Hebrews from the Babylonian Captivity. You can imagine the joy of the exiles when they approached Jerusalem. You can understand why they thought they were dreaming. When they realized that their good fortune was the real deal, their mouths were “filled with laughter” and their tongues “with shouts of joy.” The writer is reminiscing. “Back then,” he says in so many words, “we were so blessed. Our hearts were full.” Clearly, their joy was linked to their good fortune.

Of course, the writer of this psalm had a ton of providential stories to relate. The history of the Israelites from the crossing of the sea and their survival in the desert for 40 years was replete with memorable examples of God’s mighty power. A pillar of fire by night, and a cloud by day. Manna and quail. Water from a rock. The Ten Commandments. The victory at Jericho. The slaying of Goliath. The kingdom of David. The prophet Elijah. The contest on Mount Carmel — and so much more.

Yes, the Israelites had it going. But things got messed up, and now, the remnant in Babylon has been long forgotten by Yahweh, or so it would seem.

And then, their “fortunes” were restored! They are back in Jerusalem, even though it is now a decrepit city kneeling in the ashes of 100 years of war and destruction.

This is what the writer recalls. Weeping in Babylon; rejoicing in Jerusalem. Would they say they were happy or joyful? Truth is, they didn’t care about semantics. The text here says joy. Yes, it was contingent joy, and so, today, we would say they were happy. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Happiness is good. And these people were happy.

But now ...

What the author of Psalm 126 now suggests is that he’d like to experience this joy again. “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (vv. 4-6). He recalled God’s mighty deeds of the past; he’s calling for a fresh visitation of the divine presence in the here and now.

Don’t we have times in our lives when we look back with fondness to a simpler time, perhaps a happier time? It was a time when everything was going

right. There was love, a relationship, children, a good job, good health — everything one could want to be both happy and full of joy. Our relationship with God seemed special, too. We were in sync. Perhaps we could even use the words of our writer: “We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” Our lives were together. The pieces all fit.

Then something happened. The pieces flew apart in a jumble and tangle, and you wonder how things got to be as they did. So you look back at another time. It’s probably fair to say that most of us have had moments similar to this. Call it nostalgia if you want.

But now, we’re calling on the Lord to restore our joy. “Do something to make us happy, Lord.” Since this is what the writer is praying, it’s probably okay if we pray the same prayer.

It is much better to ask the Lord to make us happy (give us joy, if you prefer), than to seek happiness elsewhere. Does that even work?

Not that we’re lacking suggestions. Internet sites offer a myriad of options to get our joy jumping. One site suggests that we keep a journal, create something artistic, give thanks, practice forgiveness, exercise, power down our gadgets, volunteer, watch the sun rise, send snail mail to a friend, do a good deed, read a novel, light a candle, take a warm bath, listen to running water, take risks, make the bed, spend time with happy people, drink tea and grow your own vegetables.

All good ideas. But they don’t address how to experience that special joy that comes when we receive what the apostle James calls “every good and perfect gift” that comes from above. This is the type of joy we seek. Something that’s enduring — even if it is contingent upon the Lord’s good favor.

How would you ask God for this kind of restoration, for this type of joy?

The writer uses three beautiful metaphors: drought, sorrow and farming.

First: “Lord, restore us like a barren desert that is flooded with streams.”

Second: “Lord, restore us by turning sorrow into joy.”

Third: “Lord, restore us by rewarding our sowing with reaping.”

When the deserts of our lives are flowing with water; when our tears are tears of joy not sorrow; and when we can reap a harvest, the fruit of our labor, then joy indeed will be our portion.

So on Joy Sunday, let’s not get hung up on whether the gladness in our hearts is joy or happiness. Christmas is right around the corner. It’s festive. Decorations are up. Christmas trees are decorated. It’s a beautiful time — even for unbelievers in the secular world:

Sleigh bells ring, are you listening?

In the lane, snow is glistening

A beautiful sight

We’re happy tonight

Walking in a winter wonderland

But for believers, the happiness we experience now is at Mach 5. Something else besides bright lights, office parties, rum cookies, fruitcake and mulled wine is going on now.

We are about to welcome the ineffable, eternal God of the universe into our temporal and tangible world. This is huge. Imagine you live in a small village in Wyoming just outside of Laramie — a little hamlet the size of ... let’s say

Bethlehem. You learn that the President of the United States is going to visit, or China's Xi Jinping, Canada's Justin Trudeau, Lady Gaga, Amyl and the Sniffers, Simon Cowell, or Prince William and Kate. The excitement and preparation would be enormous. Our minds cannot even wrap around the kind of prep work and security that would be involved.

But one night long ago, an event occurred that was both terrifying and exciting. The Lord of heavens stopped by in a village, and this Lord stayed for about 33 years. His arrival was announced by angels, and notice a particular word that appears in the proclamation. Here is the text:

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:10-11).

Joy. Great joy. For all people.

One final word. So often, the public characterization of Christians is that of dour and sour, dough-faced church ladies, or a bunch of grumpy old men in suits, or of protesters who spew hate-filled messages while waving banners with Bible verses on them.

On Joy Sunday, let's be reminded that the essential nature of a Jesus person is — among other things — joy. Let's put joy on display. Let's give the world some Jesus joy.

Actually, let's give them Jesus. The joy will follow. Amen.

## **Musical Interlude:**

## **Meditation**

## **Caleb Simper**

**A Time of Prayer** — *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at [dbhanks92@comcast.net](mailto:dbhanks92@comcast.net) or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

During this holy season of waiting, O God, grace us with the presence of mind to be attuned to what this season is all about, and just what it is we are celebrating. Let us walk slowly into Advent and wait as Mary did, and ponder this wondrous birth. Instead of racing to the store and becoming engulfed in mall madness, let us walk slowly into Advent, and watch for the holy happenings that come to us as we journey to Bethlehem. In the midst of December darkness, open our eyes to the gift of light in our lives ... the smile of a child ... the hug of a friend ... our family gathered here, in this place ... the delight of music ... the aroma of good things baking and the wind in our faces as we walk toward the warmth of home. Let us walk slowly into Advent that we might take note "whenever and wherever God comes ... even to a godforsaken place like a stable." Let us watch where we are going as we walk slowly into Advent so that we might kneel and greet the babe with ready and restful hearts. We offer our prayers in the name of the one for whom we wait, who walks with us even in our darkest times, Jesus the Christ who taught us to say when 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 debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

### **Closing Hymn:**

### **“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You”**

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;  
Hearts unfold like flow’rs before Thee, op’ning to the sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

All Thy works with joy surround Thee, earth and heav’n reflect Thy rays,  
Stars and angels sing around Thee, center of unbroken praise.  
Field and forest, vale and mountain, flow’ry meadow, flashing sea,  
Singing bird and flowing fountain call us to rejoice in Thee.

Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest,  
Wellspring of the joy of living, ocean depth of happy rest!  
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother, all who live in love are Thine;  
Teach us how to love each other, lift us to the joy divine.

Mortals, join the happy chorus, which the morning stars began;  
Father love is reigning o’er us, brother love binds man to man.  
Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife,  
Joyful music leads us Sunward in the triumph song of life.

### **Benediction:**

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us! God has anointed us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and to comfort all who mourn. Even in this season — perhaps especially in this season — our world aches to hear the good news of God’s advent, of God’s coming among us. Share the good news, in word and deed.

And may the grace of our coming Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of the God who sent him, and the joy of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to receive him, be with us always. Amen.

### **Postlude:**

### **O Come Divine Messiah**

**Anderson**



## **PRAYER LIST**

Amy Belli  
Carolyn Barney  
Jack Brigham  
Becky Colwell  
David Dufour  
Diana Escarbie  
Cathy Fontaine  
Chuck Funk  
Bob and Pat Goguen  
Jerilyn Hoffman  
Linda Hurd  
Mary Jackson  
Tom Kazanjian  
Sarah Kee  
Bob and Doris Lane  
Diane Lane Cormier  
Linda Long  
Family of Carol Maki

Lorraine Michaud  
Audrey Painchaud  
Maria Piazza  
Emma Pollice  
Melanie Pouliot  
Jackie Reiss  
Martha Quinn  
Del Sampson  
Elwin Shepard  
Ron Smith  
Arlene Sirois  
Diane Staples  
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry  
Donna Thorne  
Daniel Tousignant  
Marilyn Wales  
Mary Wayman

**All who are experiencing difficult times and situations**

**All who are lonely or depressed**

**All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus**

**All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders**

**Our Church and all of its members and friends**

**All members of our armed forces who have committed themselves  
to the protection of liberty**

---

# **Rollstone Congregational Church**

**United Church of Christ**

**199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA**

**Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571**

**Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608**

**Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein**