Squamish United Church December 22, 2019

Rev. Karen Millard

Advent 4

Scriptures

Isaiah 7: 13-15 (CEB)

Matthew 1: 18-25 (The Message)

**Make the Nations Prove: Peaceful Joy**

A few years ago only a few days before Christmas two men in Florida decided to go sailing while their wives went Christmas shopping. While they were out sailing a terrible storm arose. It was all they could do to keep their boat under control. As they maneuvered their way back to land, their boat became grounded on a sandbar. They had to jump overboard and push with all their might trying to get the boat into deeper water. While they were doing this, the wind was blowing, the waves were rushing upon them and they were soaking wet, knee deep in mud. One of the guys looked at his buddy and said, “You know, it sure beats Christmas shopping though.”

So often we become so accustomed to our life being filled with the stresses and turmoil of daily life that we think it is normal. We just get used to it. We COPE. We have long forgotten what peace looks like and don’t recognize it when we see it. Listen closely to what people talk about, and you will find that the stresses and turmoil of our times has robbed people – even Christians – of their peace. At this Advent season we are invited to reflect on the Restorer of our peace. We can always come back to our faith in God, our relationship with the coming of Christ, and find joy in the peace of that relationships.

Brene Brown says “Joy, collected over time, fuels resilience - ensuring we'll have reservoirs of emotional strength when hard things do happen.” -

It may be easy to think that, of the four themes we focus on in Advent, “joy” is the most expendable. It’s the one we’re most likely to dismiss or forgo because we’re busy and the world is a hard place, and it just doesn’t seem as important or helpful as hope or peace or love. And yet here it is, right in the middle of our Advent season, demanding our attention. In fact this year it is in our face ever week, overflowing, it is even unabashed.

Perhaps joy has an important role to play after all. We are surrounded by mess and chaos and a world that sometimes seems like it’s on the brink of being lost entirely. It’s a slog. It’s exhausting. But joy is what reminds us why love, and hope, and faith are worth fighting for. It’s what reminds us that the hard things, no matter how much it may feel like they’re winning, they don’t get the final word. God does. And that is good news.

The holidays can be a hard season for some, a time when joy is hard to come by. And that’s okay. But just as we hold faith for one another, we can hold joy for one another too.

Joy gives us the strength we need to keep going. And it gives us the space to breathe a little too. And dream. In the midst of a narrative of despair, joy interjects like a voice of protest and resistance. And that’s what Jesus does too, in coming into the world, right in the midst of the chaos and the mess and the muck. It’s what Christmas does, year after year when it explodes into the middle of our lives and reminds us that God is with us, always, and that is reason to celebrate and rejoice.

After all It might be hard to believe that God would come to this world, to be with us. Harder still to believe that God would come to us as a baby. No wonder then, that an angel visits Joseph in his dreams to show Joseph how the Messiah would be born into the world. “Do not be afraid,” says the angel. There is much to be afraid of! The 9 months of pregnancy allows plenty of opportunity for feelings of fear and anxiety to take residence even in hopeful parents. Imagine those 9 months for Joseph and Mary. That is why in this time of transition, this time of gestation, God sends a messenger of peace. The peace God offers, peaceful joy is deep and wide, nudging its way through their lives and today our lives and occasionally bursting forth in radiant light.

Earl Nightingale said, that 40 percent of the things you worry about will never occur anyway. 30 percent of the things you worry about are the things in the past that can’t be changed by all the worry in the world. 12 percent of the worries are needless worries about our health. 10 percent of them are petty, miscellaneous worries. Only 8 percent are real and legitimate worries. So, 92% or your worries are really just a fog with no substance at all. I know this fog too well. This week take time in the practice of finding, and embracing peaceful moments of joy as we prepare our souls for the coming of Christ.

Like Joseph, a deep breath and allow yourself to discover what may be an unexpected gift in the midst of a difficult situation? What will help us choose peace and serenity instead of joining chaos when we encounter it? We don’t often think about joy as “peaceful.” We think of it as exuberant and somewhat “happy-clappy.” It certainly can be. But deep joy offers hope, love, and peace. Joy has a power that resides like an always-flowing river of grace and the presence of God that we can dip into when we need it most. Peaceful joy says “stick with it, beloved, it will be alright” even when it doesn’t feel completely right, right now. Peaceful joy says to us, “it doesn’t have to be this way.” We can shift from joining the chaos to being in the quiet eye of the storm where Emmanuel, “God With Us,” has set up residence. And we can be “Emmanuel” for each other when the storms threaten to overtake the people, community, and creation around us.

Peaceful joy brings balance to what feels out-of-sorts in the world. In a world that so often feels scary, peaceful joy speaks words of comfort. In a world that values strength and fortitude, peaceful joy portrays vulnerability. In a world full of kings and rulers fighting for power, peaceful joy is born in the form of a baby.

It is intentional that the advent texts are challenging and filled with unsettling circumstances because this whole story is set in unsettling circumstances. If we ignore the setting of our scriptures we miss the whole point of them. Maybe we need to be unsettled. Maybe the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love feel a little too soft, a little too light for this penitential season that was originally more like Lent. Making room for Christ in our lives, our homes, our churches, our neighborhoods, our daily work often feels more like a battle, leaving us weary from all the wrestling-made-blind in the enveloping darkness.

Maybe we need to reevaluate our expectations of peace, and our pursuit of it. There's an important distinction between peacekeeping and peacemaking, after all. We need both, so long as true peace is the peace being made and kept.

Peacekeeping is open, receptive, and willing; it fosters security. Peacekeepers listen, notice, pay close attention and draw others in. Peacekeepers tend to the comfort of others, embracing both sides of an argument with measured patience and gracious equanimity. But peacekeepers can make themselves small and keep their own voices quiet to avoid conflict, settling for a false peace because they're unsure of reaching the better thing that exists beyond hurt feelings and relational fallout.

Peacemaking is disruptive, at first. It is active, intentional, and clear-sighted. Peacemakers bring the full measure of their unique selves to the pursuit of justice for the oppressed, inclusion for the marginalized, redemption for the lost causes, and healing for the brokenhearted. They engage in messy, back-breaking, wonderful, glorious, rabble-rousing work—and they don't care whether anyone is comfortable (including themselves). But peacemakers can lose patience and leave others behind in their zeal for reform, rather than wait for the true peace on the other side of careful consideration and consensus-building, accepting occasional relational stress as necessary when a quieter, slower way may have gotten to the same place with less hurt or frustration.

As someone who lands in the category of “peacekeeper” on the enneagram scale I get this. I will do whatever it takes to make sure everyone else is happy and keep everyone else at peace but I can do it in such a way that it can come at a great cost to me. And that is something peacekeepers and fixers always have to work on. However if others do not see the importances of making everything right for everyone a deep frustration emerges. So in this season when some of that is welling up the question must become How are you making room for true peace in your own life as well as in the life of others?

I imagine Joseph just might have fallen into this peacekeeper category. I mean here he is on a journey that has been handed him without his request. At first he reacted with fear and despair until the angel appeared and offered peace and asked him to join into the ushering in of peace into the whole world. He accepted this tall order but I imagine it came at some cost. He accepted the role so that the whole world might be turned upside-down in such a way that peace would overcome power. That isn’t very realistic it wasn’t then and it doesn’t seem to be now but that is the call on our lives as followers of the way. We are to be opened to the welcome of peace. Just as Joseph we are called to be the mid-wives of peace, the raisers of peace in this world.

Thomas Merton wrote. “Into the world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, His place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This Advent season, we remember that peace is so much more than a silent night. It's blinding light pouring down from the heavens while mighty voices raise shouts of praise, and honor, and gloria, and good news, and do not fear—and also, yes, peace. Peace is John the Baptist, wild-eyed and wise, proclaiming repentance and rough places made plain; ways in the wilderness and the kingdom at hand. Peace is Mary, young and brave and receptive, saying yes to God then prophesying the exaltation of the lowly and the scattering of the proud; the mighty cast down and the hungry filled. Peace is Joseph listening to the message of the Angel and accepting the roll of raising the son of peace

May we join in the chorus with open hearts and able hands. May we both proclaim and embody, receive and usher in, the kingdom-of-God-come-near.

Pursuing true peace alongside you,

May you know deep, abundant peace-filled joy this week.

Thank you,

Karen

1. Thomas Merton OCSO [↑](#footnote-ref-1)