

Glories Stream
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
December 9, 2018

Psalm 86: 9-11, Luke 2:8-20

When was the last time you were amazed...in a good way? When was it that you were surprised by the things these candles represent: by hope, by peace, by joy, by love, by Christ? When you were you last fascinated by justice and mercy, reconciliation and redemption, forgiveness and peace, inclusiveness and love?

Advent is a great time of year to be on the look out for these kinds of things. Just last night I was in the car with Clark as we rounded the small hill on 111 just before getting to the green. There it was, our beautiful Christmas tree, which our teens strung with new lights last weekend. All of the houses had candles in the windows. The night was clear, and quiet for a change – calm and bright. That’s when Clark turned to me, and said: *“It’s breathtaking, isn’t it? So full of peace and joy.”* I can always count on him to bring that sense of wonder.

How many of you have been watching Christmas movies recently? That’s OK, don’t be shy. What are some of your favorites? How about Home Alone? That’s a great one.

The main character is a little boy named Kevin McAllister. His family is in a rush to get out the door to catch a flight out of town for the holidays, and in their anxiousness they accidentally leave Kevin behind. Little Kevin, a 2nd grade boy, is left “home alone” for Christmas. Those of you who came from large families know that it’s a totally believable plot!

Maybe you remember that in Kevin’s neighborhood there’s a scary old man with a big bushy beard and terrifying eyes. And the old man doesn’t speak; he just kind of lurks around the neighborhood. So, people keep their distance from him and assume that he’s bad news.

Later in the movie, Kevin finds his way to a church on a cold winter’s night. There’s a children’s choir warming up for a concert they’ll perform a little later in the evening. The glow of candles warms the sanctuary, and the beautiful sounds of “O, Holy Night” fill the air. Kevin finds a spot to sit down. Maybe it’s a good distraction from the fact that his family has left him home alone.

But then he looks up from where he's sitting, and there's that scary old man towering over him. Kevin is terrified; frozen with fear. And then the man smiles and says, *"Merry Christmas,"* and asks the boy if he can sit down. Kevin slowly nods his head. The man sits down next to him and says, *"You know, people say a lot of things about me that just aren't true. You can say 'hello' to me every now and then."* And just like that, terror shifts to amazement and wonder.

The man continues talking, and asks the boy *"Do you know why I'm here?"* And he told Kevin that his granddaughter was singing the choir, but that he couldn't come to the program later in the evening because his son, her dad, would be there. It seems that a few years ago his son and he had gotten in a fight, lost their tempers, and said that they didn't want to see each other again.

Kevin responds, *"You should call your son. Let him know you miss him."* The old man said, *"What if he won't talk to me?"* And Kevin said, *"At least you'll know. Then you can stop worrying about it, and then you won't have to be afraid anymore."*

(Spoiler alert: At the end of the movie, Kevin glimpses out his window to see the old man in front of his house across the street opening his arms to hug his son who's come to visit him with his once-estranged family.)

When the things that might terrify us are transformed into that which amazes us (the things that are always there, if we only have eyes to see), it's upon us to share that amazement with the world. By this we will all come to realize what should be normal: the great Shalom of God. Peace on earth, amazing, surprising joy and good will towards all.

Today is about joy. Yeah, I know. We are already "out of order" with these four Advent words. And so, I apologize to the purists among us. Joy SHOULD be next week, that's what our banner says outside. But this year, we are following the order of the four verses of Silent Night and how can we NOT connect joy with "Glories" and "Alleluias?"

And this year, we are also way farther into the story than a typical Advent that saves the manger scene for Christmas Eve. But I think it's a good thing to spend a little more time with the birth accounts since most years we don't linger there. Staying by the manger and taking in the parts of the story with slow intention is like rolling Viana chocolates over your tongue for a while instead of chewing and gulping (speaking of joy!).

So let's just focus on those quaking shepherds for a bit.

They were scared, and for good reason. These lowest-wage earners, these hired hands, were working the night shift, quite literally "living in the fields." At any moment, a predator (animal or human) could jump out at them from the shadows. It's dark. And quiet. But then Luke's gospel tells us that something... something that felt absolutely apocalyptic ... shook the earth where they stood.

Fear can make us feel like we are on the edge. If we are jumpy already, anything that vaguely seems different than what we are accustomed becomes a threat. We become hyper-aware, and spend our energy on the look-out for the bad stuff we hear about every day, on the news, on our phones, seemingly everywhere.

I know when I get overwhelmed with fear (and who doesn't in this fast-paced, consumer driven, expectations-out-of-control world), I start to enjoy life a lot less. I start thinking... no, obsessing... about how to solve whatever problem seems to be front and center that day. And I let that fear steal my joy. Because, guess what? The next day, there will be something new to be troubled about. It's not a far jump to stop appreciating (or even seeing) all the good all around me.

Every time we recognize and let ourselves embrace joy (even in the midst of everything not being perfect just yet) we let that star shine its light from within us, to the world.

The shepherds in the field had no idea what their future would hold when those angels appeared to them. They were the very **first** people outside of Jesus's family to hear of his arrival and the importance of his birth. And by appearing before humble, hardworking shepherds – the image of who God cares about and who God equips for ministry was radically transformed.

The shepherds' lives were changed when the angels spoke to them. It all changed again when they met the baby Jesus and his parents. But what I love most is that the shepherds took these transformative experiences with them back to their towns and their families and they told everyone!

I imagine all the people that heard their story felt their own lives shifting – shifting with awe that God would choose the simple shepherds to send a message, that God would choose a little baby born into humble circumstances to be the Messiah, that God might even choose one of them for greatness or goodness or love.

And if we are open to it, God is poised to change the life of any one of us. It doesn't matter what we do for work, how dusty and dirty we feel, how overlooked we think we've been, or even if we consider ourselves to be equipped. God brings messages of hope and joy to all people, including the shepherds, including me, and including you.

The shepherds were the seed planters in their communities, preparing people for what would soon come, preparing them for an experience of God that they had never before imagined. All they had to do was share their story of how their own life had radically changed that night in the fields.

We proclaim, just by being here together in community, what joy really means. We testify that the joy that comes with Christ sticks around. It's there in the best of times, but it's even there when times are hard.

You can be a joyful person and still cry alongside the world. Because being joyful means you know it isn't supposed to be that way, and you believe deep down in your heart that it can be better.

On Christmas Eve we will read these words from the Gospel of John: *"The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."* In other words, Christ is the light of the world, and the worst that the world can do is still not enough to extinguish that light. And if that light cannot be extinguished, than neither can that joy.

Our job is to spread that light and spread that joy. Joy is different than just a warm feeling, because to claim it is an act of faith, not just in the good times, but also in the bad. As we continue to watch and wait this Advent, let us be witnesses to the light of Christ, and the joy it brings. And live as the people who believe that this joy, and the child who brings it, can change the world.

And if we do that, we are halfway to Christmas already! Amen.