

## We Will Rejoice”

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; December 17, 2017

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I’ve always thought that it is appropriate that the liturgical color for this season of Advent – the season of slowing down – of delaying gratifications – of preparing – of embracing the darkness – is blue. Blue – one of the coolest colors – home decorators would tell us – is not a warm color like red or yellow. But blue – blue is the color for hope. Blue Christmas, the worship service of grief and sadness -- then, is really something of a celebration – a recognition that naming and recognizing our sadness leads to hope. That with God – all things are possible. That the hope is for us – but is always more than anything we ourselves can bring about or make happen. This blue season of Advent reminds us that the hope of Christmas is the hope of community – the hope of relationship – of mutual, positive, caring, compassionate relationship.

Today, on this third Sunday of Advent – a Sunday when our Advent candlelighters have reminded us that today we celebrate joy – you have my permission if you need it to say – “not me – I don’t feel joy – I’m not celebrating. This year, I’m having a hard time.” If you need permission – here it is. You can let go – set aside expectations – and at least some of your ideas about holiday joy and what you think joy means in your life. Advent acknowledges – in ways that the mad dash to Christmas outside of this place does not – that we need to give ourselves time and space to acknowledge life as it really is. To name that particularly this time of year is hard – and painful – and sad – and sometimes overwhelming – and empty - for some of us - and for some of those we know.

Part of what it means to be a member of a faith community – a church – is the recognition that we are not alone; that we are community; we are in relationship one with another – and it is always healing and authentic for us to be in touch with the quieter, shadow-filled, but still hopeful message of Advent and Christmas.

And this Advent message of joy and hope goes way, way beyond the happiness and giddiness and holly jolly frenzy of the holiday season - goes in fact - to the very heart of the deep abiding joy of this holy season.

Our scripture text for today from the prophet Isaiah painfully reminds us of the kind of grieving and despair our culture almost never focuses on in this season. Isaiah is speaking words of comfort and reassurance and hope to a destroyed people. They had been forced from their homes, sent into exile where they were required to serve their captors – and now – exile is over and they have been sent back to Jerusalem to pick back up where they left off – years ago. You might think this homecoming would be cause for rejoicing – and it starts out that way – but reality quickly sets in. Nothing is the same. A city in ruins awaits their return. Everything is in need of repair. And the ones not sent into exile – perhaps relatives who'd been left behind – you might think they would be celebrating the return of the exiled ones. Not so. As bad and disorienting as exile was – for those sent away and those left behind - the return is nearly as bad. It is not a happy homecoming – for anyone. The community has been broken.

One of the wonderful things about healthy community is the ways in which we hold one another up - the ways we hold one another together.

When our lives are falling apart – when our faith in God is truly shaken – when the messages we receive are earth shattering – the function of a community of faith is to be present – to listen – to help as best we are able - to prepare for what is inevitably ahead. Sometimes that means we will sit together – in the quiet – and wait – and cry – and pray – and act as though we trust and hope – even when we may not. Supporting one another means we live as though we already trust the promises of God- with- us – even as we wait for a new word from the still speaking God to lead and guide us onto new paths.

Isaiah’s message to the despairing Israelites is a message of now and not yet. ‘Now’ is grief and despair – shattered lives and hopelessness. ‘Not yet’ is hope and joy, celebration and exultation. And now and not yet are all mixed up together. And the kind of reconciliation, and healing, and hopefulness - and wholeness - this mad mix brings is deeper and more profound than if we were simply moving linearly along a track from grief to joy. Isn’t that what we really hope for – long for – deep down – this Christmas season?

Here at Union Congregational Church, we are a church smack dab in the middle of rebuilding – revitalizing – of re-mem-bering who we are – and we are so full of promise. Here in this Advent season, pregnant with hope, in the days and weeks ahead we are going to be watching for and expecting the promises of God to be born into our lives and the life we share as this community of faith.

In this new year, we are going to help one another search for meaning; we are going to pray together; we are going to share our stories and walk – sit or stand – alongside one another. Sometimes we will just sit in the darkness together, in quiet, and wait, and cry and laugh and sometimes even celebrate - and hold one another – trusting in the promises of the Holy One.

Sometimes we'll not even understand what it is we are for one another – just that we are. And in that – we will rejoice.