

Immanuel United Church

3rd Advent Sunday, Dec 13th, 2020

Welcome

Description of Joy (Sherry Brodie & Danika Huff)

Where did you find joy in the past during difficult times and where do you find joy now?

Today, we light the candle named Joy.

**May its light help us find our way.**

Hymn: VU 7 *Hope is a Star* (V. 1, 2, 3)

**Hope is a star that shines in the night,  
leading us on till the morning is bright.**

Refrain: **When God is a child there's joy in our song.**

**The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid.**

**Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth,  
giving a promise of safety and worth. (Refrain)**

**Joy is a song that welcomes the dawn,  
telling the world that the Saviour is born. (Refrain)**

Call to Worship: (Pat Schulz)

These are strange and unsettling times.

**Like the shepherds on the hills, alone with their flocks,**

We too can be afraid; looking for the dangers lurking in this unfamiliar terrain.

Like the shepherds,

**we will listen for the angels bringing tidings of great joy.**

**We will hear again the good news of the birth of Jesus.**

With joyful hearts,

**Let us worship together.**

5 Murals and Gospel reading: Walk the Journey through the Advent to Christmas  
(Artists: Eileen Metcalfe, Luba Olesky, Jennifer Antymis; the reader: Lynne Strome)

Luke 2: 8-12

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them "be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

Hymn: VU44 ***It Came Upon A Midnight Clear***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7She6so9Og>

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-9, 11 (Wendy Boyd)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.  
They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.  
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;

all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

Immanuel Choir: Come Emmanuel Come (Flute: Debbie Bilous)

Reflection: Inside the Belly of The Advent Whale



I wonder if some of you might find this joke makes sense and say, "Oh, that's me!" like I did.

"The 3 A.M. Wake up" (Read the words in the picture above.)

\*Sorry for the words like "Black" truth or "civilization" as they certainly imply a racial and a Western bias.\*

Perhaps waking up at 3 am is like waking up in the middle of the night during a pandemic. Down, down, down, you go into sheer panic. "It's all impossible," we groan. It's been announced that Code Red goes even deeper and is extended until Jan 8th, 2021. Code Red swallows up both Christmas and New Year's Day -- the wonderful, colourful, shining, special days children and grown-ups alike looked forward to ever since last December. We groan, "It's all impossible!"

This week, I also started thinking about what will happen to my kids and other families with school-aged children in January, once the schools revert to remote learning just like last spring. Home-schooling was like an endless tunnel; parents and teachers all began to burn out. "It's all impossible!" I screamed. "Will all these impossible and unbelievable nightmares never end?" Sometimes I wake up at 3 am, and when I do, I often fall into endless thinking... Can I do this? Can I do that? Is this choice better? Have I done this right?

Perhaps this Advent comes to us like the "Great Whale of Doom" (see the joke) swallowing us up and disintegrating the texture of our life. We are looking for hope, peace, joy and love, ... the signs of the birth of the holy child, Emmanuel, God-With-Us, at 3 A.M. And we scream, "It's all impossiiiiibleeeeeee."

In the two last Advent services, I invited you to see/find Advent in light of Israel's memories of the past, played on the unforgettable geographical and historical landscapes: Exodus (show the picture of the basket), Return from Exile (show the picture of the winding highway.) On this Third Sunday, I would like to talk with you about Advent as the Great Whale, an Apocalypse, and ask, "What kind of whale would Advent be? (Especially this year's Advent). The Great Whale of Doom? ... What is your 'Advent Whale' like and what can it be this year?"

Before we ponder the questions, please let me explain what I mean by apocalypse. (Some of the insights here came from a Centre for Christian Studies' Friday workshop with Nancy Sanders. Thank you, Nancy.) In the Hebrew Bible, apocalyptic times are reported in the prophecy, lament, and witness around the first and second destructions of the Jerusalem Temple in BC 586 and CE 70. What is an apocalypse? This is my understanding: It's the name of "the end time." However, the apocalyptic world refuses to end. People are frightened; Terror and fear invade everyone's life. It's the mass experience. No one can escape this situation. Perhaps the impact may be more significant and disproportionate to the most vulnerable populations. However, everyone's life is affected somehow. It's the mass suffering in the event of overwhelming destruction ("of the world as we know it"). Some could say the status quo of the old world is passing away. However, while it can be true, it destroys not only bad status quo but also good gifts in life too (That's the

hardest part.) It is traumatizing, and yet everyone's experience of the apocalypse -- how each one, each community, goes through it, struggles with it, copes with it, heals from it, is different. It also contains truth about the world: just like climate crisis. We cannot turn away from the impending reality and close our eyes, but we are tempted to avoid the news and generally live in denial. At the same time, apocalypse is also when we courageously face the deep wounds of our time. We yearn for healing. We seek to find the right path for us as we navigate this massive Whale Time together. In this sense, apocalypse is never a totally bad time, but is good news too, which is where the ambiguity of apocalypse comes in human experience. Apocalypse calls forth new hope.

Quite a few people have told me that they are finding this a hard time to feel hopeful. When I asked someone, "What is on your mind lately, in your heart?", my wise friend said, "I am worried if there is lack of hope in the world right now..." for various and different reasons and different contexts. We act and pray for the end of oppression, the end of injustice, the end of suffering (hoping to bring the end to the apocalypse), and yet sometimes, or often, we can feel that perhaps the tasks are beyond our power.

I was told that in the 70's, when Korea was under militant governmental dictatorship, Min-Jung theologians (a stream of liberation theology; Min-Jung means People) proclaimed and persisted with the Kingdom of God movement singing New Heaven and New Earth for Korean democracy. They sang in jails and schools and on the streets. Students learned scriptural passages on the Apocalypse in their theological schools. In those days when it felt like it was impossible to change the world with their power and alone, the faith in "divine transcendence" still encouraged them; "Transcendence" means that even when the world seems to lack hope, even when we lack hope, even when it seems really hard to see that change is happening in the world, we still find hope in God. Scriptures teach us that sometimes we feel powerless but ultimately our enemies are also powerless, no matter how strong they look, because in the end, it is God's world. God reigns. The only mighty and powerful one, truly, is God. If we miss faith in the promise and the work of New Heaven and New Earth, apocalypse is only half of the truth. Hope comes from God's future, and it has already been planted and growing in the hearts of the people. This is the mystery of God's Kingdom as it is illustrated in the parables: the smallest mustard seed growing into a messy big bush, the leaven in the bread that makes the dough doubled and tripled, and the wild fig tree bearing fruits when the summer is near. Even if it looks like "It is all impossible" here and now, nothing is impossible. The beauty and the power in the Christmas story is that God's immanence (here and now) merges with God's transcendence (the future) in the birth of a baby.

We go through the apocalypse together.

We must open the future of heaven and earth, together.

No one can escape it. We need everyone to participate in the work the Creator has started already. God's kingdom grows irregularly and unexpectedly — there's no prescribed path — . Kingdom of God shoots new buds and puts forth its leaves every summer, with us, God's fig trees.

So, let us take heart. Believe. Look forward to Christmas, even this year! The Advent Whale is never like the Great Whale of Doom at 3 A.M. We still find the Creator's tender touch. Gentle grace. Kairos Kindness. (Kairos means God's right time.) God still can guide our lives and prepare us for where we are meant to be.

I suggest to you to find the good Advent Whale. Please note that this imagery originally was shared by Fjola Hart Wasekeesikaw, when we had a little delightful time between us. It was a long time ago called BPE "Before the Pandemic Era" when we could sit around the table and the cup of tea rose to our lips. (No masks.) She has generously given me permission to share this image and to adapt it in a new context. At that time Fjola and I were talking about "dark nights of the soul", a well-known theme in medieval Christian spirituality. In the Bible, Jonah did not want to go to the city of Nineveh, the enemy's land, even though God commanded him to do so. So he ran away and was on the boat hoping to be far, far away from the task. Then, he was thrown into the sea, drowned and swallowed up by the whale.

The miraculous Advent message from this Jonah and the whale story may be... that he was still being guided by the Creator. Falling into the inside of the whale could absolutely be scary, frightening and dreadful. However, in the story, Jonah was warm and safe inside the belly of the whale. Jonah was guided, prepared, and cared for. We cannot tell the whale where to go, but God, the Creator, guides us where we need to be and helps us to get on the right path. You might wake up at 3 A.M. You might find yourself 3 meters under the water. But flip it. The Great Whale of Doom can mysteriously show that we are still in the Creator's belly.

Let us go out into the Apocalyptic world together and look forward to Christmas this year: anticipating the new places of Christ's birth, the merging of God's summer and our winter... in the edge of this whale time, casting our trust in the warmth and safety with which God guides us and provides for us, inside the belly of Emmanuel Whale, God-With-Us.

Hymn: VU 8 ***Lo, How a Rose***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4dFRy7DJYM>

Prayers of the People (Marian Matthews)

Hymn: *'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCa6BM6-F24>

Benediction: Sung Refrain from **Hearth and Fire**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baD9MRrwPOo>

**Hearth and fire be yours tonight and all the dark outside;  
Fair the night and kind on you wherever you may bide.  
And God be the sun upon your head, the wind about your face;  
God's love upon the path you tread,  
and upon your wand'rings, peace.**