

From Oy to Joy**Sunday, December 13, 2020 || 3rd Sunday of Advent || Pastor Christy Wright***We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM and join us in prayer ONLINE or over the PHONE**Audio worship, including music, prayers, and the sermon is available at**<https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services>***Audio worship is also available at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Just dial in, enter the access code on your keypad, and you will hear the service begin with music.*****Lighting of the Joy Candle - By Jeanyne Slettom, adapted for our times***

We have lit the first two candles, one for hope and one for peace. Today we light the third candle, the candle of joy. This should be the easy one in any other year, what with the children, the lights, the music, the gathering together. But this year, everything is different. How are we to experience joy with everything going on? Perhaps the key to joy is knowing that joy isn't based on circumstances, but rather on the assurance that God has given us everlasting joy through the ever-present Holy Spirit, regardless of what life throws at us. So today, we open ourselves to joy, trusting that God has already planted it in us. All we need to do is give it care and offer it to share.

Let us pray: Loving God, we open ourselves to you, trusting that this is how you made us: you created us for joy-filled hearts and lives. Show us the creative power of hope. Teach us the peace that comes from justice. Fill us with the kind of joy that cannot be contained, but must be shared. Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you, that we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen.

Scripture Reading*Luke 1:46-55*

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely from now on, all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped the servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever."

Sermon

As most of you know, I work another job on Mondays and Fridays in the Metrowest area of Boston. One day on my way to work, I noticed beautiful glittery Christmas decorations in someone's front lawn that spelled out J-O-Y in large, three-dimensional letters. Except that it didn't spell "joy." The J had fallen over, leaving, simply, "OY." If that doesn't speak to the year 2020, I don't know what does!

This week as we gather to light our third Advent candle, the candle of joy, it might feel like this candle doesn't belong in our Advent wreath this year. And it's okay to feel this way: we've been through a lot over the past several months. We've lost loved ones, we've had to completely change our way of being, and we're all mourning what could have been. It will take time to heal from what has been a truly difficult year for so many. But at the core of it all, we know that God is still present, still with us, now and always, weeping with us when we weep, rejoicing with us when we rejoice.

In this morning's scripture reading, we hear Mary's song when she learns that she is pregnant. Mary, a young teenage girl who is with child out of wedlock, is in a very uncertain and precarious situation. Her pregnancy is the greatest scandal of all time, for she could easily have been thrown out of her household and left to live on the streets. But rather than react from a place of fear, she finds joy in knowing that she has been blessed in this very unusual and striking way: she has been called to bear the Son of God, the Messiah. And in response, she sings a song of God's goodness and the joy she has found, for God is in the business of lifting up those who are lowly, leading generations of disciples, feeding those who are hungry, and keeping promises from ages past. In Mary's song, we know that we are not alone, and we know that Jesus was sent as Love Personified, as an example of how we ought to live in the mission laid out before us.

This might be a bit unorthodox, but I want to offer a different type of sermon this morning. Even though this year has been rough, I want to share 20 wonderful things that happened in 2020 in which we can take great joy, knowing that even when all hope seems absent, even the smallest gesture of love can have surprising results. It is here where God is present.

1. Drive-In Movie Theaters across the industry have been declining steadily for the past twenty years, but this year, that all changed as theaters began to see record-breaking numbers of folks, flocking to see classic movies and the newest blockbuster hits.
2. Along with Drive-In Movies, we also invented Drive-In Concerts in 2020.
3. Many of us picked up new hobbies during quarantine, and some folks immediately hit the sewing machine, making masks for folks who needed them most.
4. For the first time in history, many pet adoption agencies had completely empty kennels because so many folks decided to adopt a new furry member into their family.
5. We learned to pick up classic pastimes such as puzzles, cards, and board games with our loved ones.
6. Local wineries and breweries quickly shifted over their operations to create much-needed hand sanitizer and often donated bottles to hospitals and nursing homes.
7. Bike and hiking trails were the busiest we've seen in years!
8. Parades are not just for Independence Day anymore - they're for weddings, birthdays, graduations, and celebrating veterans!
9. In June, a Barcelona opera house opened for the first time in months for a very unusual performance: their live audience were rows and rows of house plants, which were then donated to hospital workers, doctors, and nurses.
10. Virtual marathons and races for charity, in which the runner or cyclist runs or bikes locally rather than in a large road race, raised millions for Covid relief.
11. Musicians and artists created masterpieces to share with the world beyond anything we've ever seen during their time of quarantine.
12. Many of us learned to embrace quarantine hairstyles, which either consisted of growing our hair out or experimenting with a pair of kitchen scissors (and having our stylist fix it as soon as we could see them again!)
13. Late night talk show hosts continued to host their shows from home, complete with children bopping into the frame and saying the silliest things.
14. We finally cleaned out that dreaded closet, basement, or spare bedroom and donated goods to folks in need.
15. We flocked to our local restaurants and businesses and supported them through getting takeout and supporting their causes within the community.
16. Our caring spirit extended to those who couldn't get out of their homes due to the pandemic, and we left packages of food and goods on their doorstep to make sure they had everything they needed.
17. Because we weren't traveling this year, in the first three months of quarantine in the US we saw a drastic decrease of air pollution, down 60% from previous years!
18. In cities across the world, folks moved to their balconies to create outdoor concerts of song and joy.
19. For many, Christmas came early in the form of Christmas carols before Thanksgiving, Christmas lights immediately after Halloween, and some much needed holiday cheer.
20. And here, in our small community, we learned to connect through the internet and through conference calls, we stopped by with flowers on Easter morning, we sewed masks for one another, we reached out to one another with cards and phone calls, and we stopped by in surprise socially-distant visits complete with ice cream sundaes and balloons for our high school graduates.

It has been a year. A wild year that feels like a decade, but through it all, we truly have so much to celebrate. As we close this morning, may we experience the joy of Jesus Christ - not just in this season of Advent, but in everything we do, knowing that we are never alone, and the love of God surpasses all of our current circumstances. May we be found in joy, now and always. Amen.

Hymn of Meditation - Christmas Medley

We invite you to reflect in joy upon the music this morning and sing along as you hear tunes you recognize!

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: those affected by the Coronavirus and the health of our world, those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence and cannot breathe under the weight of oppression, those grieving the loss of loved ones, those experiencing illness or health issues - especially those who are ill with Covid-19 including George, and Sandy's son and family, and (for Al (and family as they care for him), Dan D. (Vicki's husband), Kelly R., Lindsey S., Millie, the Reim family), those in nursing homes or extended care facilities (Betty, Claire, Priscilla), those caring for others (Carrie G., Crystal, Rachel), the United Methodist Church. *Note that this list will renew each month.*

Benediction/Commission and Blessing

Rejoice in God always, and again I say, rejoice. For God has created you with the capacity for joy. We will find what makes us joyful, and make that our gift to the world. Trust in God's good will for all of creation and open yourself to God's gentle, transforming love. We will welcome new possibilities in our lives. We will offer ourselves to God's goodness. We will go forth in hope, and peace, and joy.¹

And now, may the peace of the Lord Christ go with you wherever God may send you; may God guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm; may God bring you home rejoicing at the wonders God has shown you; may God bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.²

Community Announcements

- **Christmas Eve Service - Remote Only.** Although it is heartbreaking to not be able to meet together this year for Christmas Eve, we remain distant from one another so that when we can gather, no one will be missing. This year's Christmas Eve service will be hosted by our Bishop and Cabinet as well as talented musicians from across our conference. It will be available online on our website at georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services and over the phone at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Reach out if you need help accessing these services.
- **Pastor Christy's Sabbath.** Pastor Christy will be taking Sabbath time off from Tuesday, December 22nd until Monday, December 4th. Worship service coverage will be provided by Galen Shadd on Sunday, December 27th and by Rev. Megan Stowe on Sunday, December 3rd. Mailings for both services will be sent out prior to Pastor Christy's vacation, so please hold onto them for each service. Pastoral coverage is still being confirmed, and more information will be available soon.
- **Reopening Advisory Board Update.** Due to the continuing rise in cases of Covid-19, we have decided to keep our building closed until further notice. The Board will continue to meet on a monthly basis to reassess the ever-evolving situation. Please reach out to any member of the Trustees or Reopening Advisory Board if you have any questions or would like more information about how we can make indoor worship a possibility.
- **Music Ministry.** Our Music Director, Melissa, would love to connect with you to collaborate on musical offerings this coming season. If you would like to be a part of a singing opportunity, or would like to share your instrumental or dance offerings, reach out to her at mrsqpiano@gmail.com or (508) 246-8508.
- **Is Your Contact Information Up To Date?** Please let Jane Dolan know if your contact information has changed. In case of church cancellation or other circumstances, we would love to be able to get ahold of you.
- **Pastor Christy's Office Hours.** A reminder that Pastor Christy is available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 8 AM to 4 PM, Thursdays from 8 AM to 12 noon, and Sundays when we are gathering in-person from 8 AM to 10 AM. If you cannot reach her, and it is an emergency, please leave a message and she will get back to you asap.
- **Offerings** are still being encouraged during this time. Please consider mailing your offering to our church PO Box, so that we are able to continue in ministry through Christ for the transformation of the world. Offerings can be mailed to: George Whitefield United Methodist Church, PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585
- **Heifer Project - ONGOING. WE WILL CLOSE THIS MISSION PROJECT ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20TH TO CONCLUDE OUR CHRISTMAS SEASON GIVING OPPORTUNITIES.** Thank you for supporting this mission effort during Lent! Due to the nature of this fundraiser, being one that collects change, we invite you to continue collecting change for this mission project.

Sonshine Phone Calls and Cards List

If you know of anyone who could be added to our Sonshine list, let Pastor Christy know.

Betty Hubbard
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Priscilla Toppin
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Kelly Rice
98 Lake Shore Drive
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Claire Wirf
(508) 791-8131
(mornings)
383 Mill Street
Worcester, MA 01602

Barbara Frazier
88 Masonic Home Rd.
Charlton, MA 01507

Millie Silverberg
2473 Eastway Drive
Lexington, KY 40503

¹ Jeanyne Slettom

² Book of Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals

A Companion Guide

The Upper Room Daily Devotionals

Monday, December 14th through Saturday December 19th || Written by Pastor Christy Wright

We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM daily and join us in prayer

If you do not have a copy of the newest Upper Room Daily Devotionals, let Pastor Christy know & she will send you one.

Monday, December 14th, 2020

Read 2 Timothy 2:20-25

“Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.”

I hate to admit it, but my brother and I were fierce enemies when we were growing up. We would fight over who got to control the TV, who got the larger slice of pizza, and we’d sometimes simply pick fights just because we were bored. (To my parents, I’m so sorry we were such a headache). One of the ways we eventually got over our fighting phase is by remembering what really mattered and what was important in life: it wasn’t TV shows, or greediness around food, or boredom. It was family, and above all, love. In this morning’s scripture reading, we are reminded of what actually matters: righteousness, faith, love and peace. Even though we may feel righteous in our moment of anger and feel like we need to argue, God calls us to step back for a moment and ask if we are acting from a place of wisdom or foolishness. When we act rashly, it often ends in fights that are more damaging than helpful in moving forward to a better place. As we start a new week, may we begin with a renewed sense of peace toward others, giving them the benefit of the doubt, and may we experience the Holy Spirit guiding us in divine wisdom.

Let Us Pray Together

God of peace and wisdom, when anger gets the best of us, You gently nudge us back into Your light of love. You provide a perfect example of how we ought to treat one another in Your Son Jesus Christ, whose ministry paved the way for our discipleship. Guide us, we pray, that we might love all whom we encounter with a depth beyond our imagination. Amen.

Tuesday, December 15th, 2020

Read Revelation 3:18-24

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”

Did you know that doorbells are now available with video capabilities? They connect right to your internet and alert you if there is someone at the door. These doorbell systems sense a person’s presence and can tell the difference between a person and other movement, such as a car driving by. In this morning’s scripture reading, we hear of God reminding us of the constant divine presence we always have: here God is, knocking at our door. All we need to do is answer. But this passage also invokes our soul’s necessity to be able to recognize God’s presence. Just as a video doorbell can distinguish between human and other, so too our souls are able to figure out who is at the door of our hearts: is it our own self-interest, or is it God, calling us to care for one another? As we meditate this morning, I invite you to listen to your own heartbeat, and take a moment to receive God into your heart, anew each day.

Let Us Pray Together

God, our soul’s desire, You are always with us, waiting at the doors of our hearts as we receive You in daily renewal. You are patient with us, and kind, as we continue to grow in faith with You. Help us to continue on our faith journey, that we might take heart in knowing that we are never alone through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Wednesday, December 16th, 2020

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

There is one thing that I never seem to have enough of: time. From an early age, I’ve struggled with time management, and it’s a wonder that I’ve made it through college and graduate school! I used to be very worried about getting things done by their necessary deadlines, but I’ve started to learn that if I ease up a little bit, it reduces the pressure. I’ve realized that everything that needs to get done, will get done, and if I didn’t get a chance to finish something, it wasn’t meant to be finished. It seems a bit backwards, I know, but thinking in this way has given me the peace I need to concentrate on the project at hand - and I find that I have an abundance of time to spare. In much the same way, God has blessed us with an abundance, whether in our time, comfort within our homes, or in a full pantry and refrigerator. We are called to use this abundance well - to not squander it away or let it go to waste, but rather, to use it to its fullest extent in ways that bless others for the sake of the world. God *is* able to bless us beyond our wildest imaginations, because we’ve *already* been blessed with so much. Thanks be to God for the gifts we share as we do good works in Jesus’ name!

Let Us Pray Together

God of great abundance, You have blessed us far beyond our wildest dreams, and You have shown us an abundance of grace through the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives. Teach us how to use these gifts so they might not only bless our neighbors, but the entire world, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thursday, December 17th, 2020**Read Isaiah 7:10-14**

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

One of my favorite pastimes during this season is watching the cars drive by with Christmas trees on their roofs, the glittering lights being strung up along windows and doors, and seeing folks taking walks around the Town Common, all bundled up. These are signs that Christmas is coming, as is joy and peace, which is something even a pandemic can't steal from us. God has given us many signs that we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel; and while things might not return to normal, we are learning to live in a new normal, one that increases our value of family and friends, of our healthcare system and all the folks that take care of us and others when we're sick. As we await Jesus' arrival during our Advent journey, may we recognize the signs that are before us and take heart, for God is with us through the glorious birth of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Let Us Pray Together

God of Light and Joy, You have given us signs of good news on the way as we prepare our hearts and homes for Jesus' arrival. You have blessed us with so much, and we offer our gratitude for all we have before us. When we feel down, remind us of the signs that are ever before us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Friday, December 18th, 2020**Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58**

“Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

As we near our ninth month in this pandemic, I want to share with you some of my journey as your pastor. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, this season has been an incredibly difficult time of ministry for clergy and for anyone in a caring profession. We have had to make difficult decisions about closing churches when the pandemic first arose, reopening churches and how to do so safely, and for some, outright canceling sacred gatherings, all while trying to tend to the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of all those around us. In many ways, it felt like we were at fault for circumstances beyond our control, and we were often caught in a balancing act of trying to minimize the number of folks who might be angry with us for making decisions for the good of all people. Sometimes it worked out, and sometimes it didn't. But early on, in conversations with my mentor and various colleagues, we all decided that we would press on, prayerfully discerning safe and healthy steps forward, even if it meant not meeting in person and pivoting toward different ways of doing ministry. Above all, we gave ourselves fully to God's work, because we knew our labor was not in vain. So as we continue in ministry, may we recognize the sacrifices of our leaders and those who have to make difficult decisions. May we also recognize that we are *all* equipped to do ministry, not just those who are ordained, for we are the priesthood of all believers, and we know that collectively, our work will yield a great harvest in which all people can partake.

Let Us Pray Together

God our solid rock, You are our firm foundation when all else seems to crumble away. You hold us fast to You, so that not even the strongest storm can shake us. As we continue through our pandemic journey, remind us of Your everlasting presence, so that we might do Your work for the good of all of creation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saturday, December 19th, 2020**Read Matthew 6:25-34**

“Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

The year 2020 has given us a lot to worry about - from wildfires to the economy, to a contentious election season, not to mention the pandemic. I used to watch the news and listen to the radio all the time, and I'd always have the national and state covid numbers up on my computer. I'd read as many articles as I could find, and I'd continually ask my mom, who used to work for Pfizer, about how this virus was being spread and why it had gotten so out of control. But I soon realized that this information overload was doing nothing but generating more worry and fear than anything else. As the months have worn on, I've recognized that worrying simply cannot add a single hour to our lives - there's no way it could, and in fact, worry can take our lives in unhealthy places. Instead, we are called to be alert and aware, and do what we can. This means continuing to wash our hands, limiting our gatherings, and most of all, wearing a mask whenever we're out in public. By doing these things, we're not folding to worry, but rather, we're proactively responding to our situation by ensuring we keep ourselves and others safe. When a worry arises, rather than being paralyzed by it, God gives us the strength to respond in ways that are life-giving for us and all whom we encounter. Thanks be to God for God's great wisdom and guidance, especially in times like these.

Let Us Pray Together

God of peace in uncertainty, You provide guidance when we're unsure of how to proceed. You quell our worries and fears by speaking peace into our lives and showing us how to respond. Remind us that You are always present, guiding us as we follow in Jesus' footsteps. Amen.