

Squamish United Church

December 8, 2019

Rev. Karen Millard

Advent 2 “Heaven and Nature Sing”

Scriptures:

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Matthew 3: 1-15

Radiant New Life

I was sad to miss last weeks service and kick off this series. I fell in love with the idea of the series immediately because I love the hymn Joy to the World for so many reasons. One reason being there is something deep within me that is always on a quest for joy. Not happiness but joy. I have spent time in devotion over it, I wrote many a theological paper on it. Never-ending joy is what I long for. A joy deep within that makes me open to Heaven and Nature as it sings. A sustaining joy that holds me even in the hardest, darkest times of life. Paul says “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) This verse has evolved in my heart like a fine wine over time. What used to be a handy Biblical version of my childhood motto, “*Don’t worry, be happy,*” now drifts through my tired-mom soul like the aroma of freshly-ground. Joyful takes on new meaning when I am striding through life with my eyes open to what I have and what is before me and what I have been given each and every day.

Joy is more than giddy happiness. The original Greek word for “rejoice” includes: “*to be well, thrive!*” A joy that fills us with abundant life. So because of that a series on Joy intrigued me from the beginning but I also love the idea of this series because My great, great, great (I don’t know how many greats) but my great uncle Isaac Watts wrote this hymn, Joy to the World. And so it always brings me a little extra joy when I hear it and get to sing it at Christmas. This carol however was not written for Christmas. It is Watts interpretation of Psalm 98 and refers to Christ’s second coming. Longing for God’s presence in this broken world. Longing for God’s Joy to cause heaven and earth to sing so that no longer sin and sorrow reign.

The thing is, Watts was a rebel in his day he was a pastor and a song writer before his time. He sought to break the church out of its somber, solemn box and bring Joy and hope and even

maybe some emotion into the religious rituals of the day. Following in his fathers footsteps he was a dissenter of the Church of England, his father was even thrown in jail for his rebellion. That is probably what I love about Uncle Isaac most. His music pushed the boundaries by going into scriptures outside of the psalms and using the musicality of bar tunes (for his day). But most of all he longed to see the light of Christ shine in the darkest hardest places of the world.

And that is actually the main reason the Christian calendar placed the celebration of Christs birth in December in the Northern hemisphere. Christmas is the deep expression of the birth of Jesus the Christ, at the same time the night sky is telling us the same thing. When the Christian calendar was put together there was a desire to connect the whole Christian story with all of creation. The cosmos is the visible moving manifestation of the Christ. So when Christianity wants to tell the story of Jesus the Christ it wants to tell the cosmic, eternal story of God. And so the seasons of early Christianity in the northern hemisphere connect with the story. It begins with darkness and fresh radiance, light comes forth out of darkness. We think of the time when the days are very short and the nights are long. The winter solstice the time of the deepest dark and the winter cold. This is the moment that fresh radiance is born, this is the moment we have something new and fresh arising. So December 25th the ancient day of the winter solstice was also claimed to be the day we celebrated the birth of the light in the world. The Christian story longs to tell us that the closer we are to the deepest darkness the closer we are to the great cosmic Christ, to the great radiance, the light of the world.

Even though Christmas is filled with Joy and hope a I am fully aware that for some of you Joy is not the first emotion you are waking up with in the morning. You're not living a life of constant happiness (even if that is what you portray to the outside world). This time of the year can be wonderful and... it can bring family dynamics that are hard, feelings filled with the loss of ones who have gone before us. Christmas can be hard because, just as we need water and food, humans need to belong; we are hard-wired for connection with others. This is one reason why loss can be so difficult. When we lose a friend, a job, a partner, a child, a relationship, a home—a connection is severed. It can leave one feeling alone or displaced. So where is the good news, the joy when we are in a season such as this?

The good news is often found in the belonging in the connection with Christ, in the cosmos and so much more. Some people feel a sense of “home” where they currently reside while others feel

“home” at the family farm across the country or their mother’s house the next county over. There are people who have many homes, people who have no home, and people who have a home to which they can not return. Some homes are filled with love and nourishment while some homes are filled with anxiety and hunger. Home is a place and also a people. Every one of us needs a home. We need to belong. In these things we find joy. Unfortunately, for many, a sense of joy or a sense of home is elusive. I wanted to acknowledge that as we enter into this season focussed on joy.

And the hope is that here, in this sacred space, we become family for each other. We pray with and for each other. We hold the light, joy, hope and love when others can not. We listen. We allow for the breadth and depth of human emotion. Are you sad? That’s okay. You still belong here. Are you angry? That’s okay. You still belong here. Are you lonely, aching, numb, happy, hopeful, joyful? Your whole self belongs here.

While people long for joy and hope, sometimes it can be hard to see or find. So we look to the scriptures and to the rituals and to song and prayer and as in todays scripture a call to remember our baptism. A call to remember our initiation into a community in which we are called to be the hands and feet of Christ in a broken world. Advent is a time of anticipation. A time of hope for good and gracious things to come. But it isn’t a time of passive waiting. In this time between the darkness of night and the light of day each of us is called to prepare the way. We can wait around for the right tools for the job or we participate in the creating of them. We can continue to see just what is on the surface or we can dig deep and see something we could not have even imagined. We embrace one another with a sense of love and belonging just as the wolf lies down with the lamb.

The poetry from the Isaiah reading and the cries of John the Baptist make me think of the power of music and singing. I cannot count the number of times people in grief have said to me “I can’t come to church because when the hymns are sung I weep, I can’t control myself.” I am not much of a pressure person, I always want to allow each person to choose their own experience but I often want to say “then come and weep.” We need to learn to weep together as a culture to share in the darkness so that together we can begin to see the light. Something powerful happens when we raise our voices together, even for those who participate by listening. Song is created by breath and by vibrating sounds waves; the music literally passes from one body to another,

resonating within each person. What a delightful way to celebrate and remember loving joy, to feel it run through our very being.

Repeat the sounding Joy, Watts reminds us. That is what faith is about. Heaven and Nature repeating the sounding joy. The Hopeful joy, the love filled joy. The story of Christmas isn't a new one to any of us. It is one filled with memories and nostalgia, something we long to recreate every year - even when the year has been hard. Even today's scriptures remind of us the radical and unexpected ways God's love shows up. In Isaiah we read about a shoot coming from a stump. A shoot growing from the stump of Jesse, the gifts of the spirit, the peaceable kingdom where predators and their prey live side by side, and babies play unharmed near poisonous snakes. Life popping up in or perhaps clinging to something perceived as dead.

At the beginning of his book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, forester and author Peter Wohlleben describes coming across a group of mossy stones in the forest. Intrigued by their unusual shape, he bent down to take a closer look. Upon inspection he realized these "stones" were alive and rooted in the ground; they were green and could not be moved. He steps back and notices the "stones" laid in a pattern and he realizes, "What I had stumbled upon were the gnarled remains of an enormous ancient tree stump."¹ Nature has a way of showing us what it looks like to hold fast to life and love and joy. We see living stones or shoots coming from a stump and something about it resonates in our soul. God is at work here. New life is emerging here. It reminds me of walking through the desert in the middle east and seeing flowers emerging out of cracks in the rocks. It seemed as if the land was barren and dry and un-livable and yet nature proves us wrong. "*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...*" So there it is again, nature connecting with life and faith. Who could imagine anything growing as they sat on the stump of utter despair? I've sat there myself, perhaps you have, too. You may be there now -- at that place where hope is cut off, where loss and despair have deadened your heart.

Well that is exactly when God's Advent word comes to sit with us. This word will not ask us to get up and dance. The prophet's vision is surprising, but small. The nation would never rise again. The shoot would not become a mighty cedar. The shoot that was growing would be different from what the people expected:

For he grew up before them like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (Isaiah 53: 2)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse... fragile yet tenacious and stubborn. It would grow like a plant out of dry ground. It would push back the stone from the rock-hard tomb.

It will grow in the heart of a man cut off by sorrow until one morning he can look up again. It will grow in the hearts of people told over and over that they are nothing. The plant will grow. You've seen it happen haven't you? What if we believe this fragile sign is God's beginning? Perhaps then we will tend the seedling in our hearts, the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of our disbelief. Do not wait for the tree to be full grown. God comes to us in this Advent time and invites us to move beyond counting the rings of the past. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while, and God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us: "Look! Look -- there on the stump. Do you see that green shoot growing?"

O come, green shoot of Jesse, free
Your people from despair and apathy;
Forge justice for the poor and the meek,
Grant safety for the young ones and the weak.

Rejoice, rejoice! Take heart and do not fear,
God's chosen one, Immanuel, draws near.

It's just like John the Baptist who arrives in his own (peculiar) way, this character sings of the radical love of God in Jesus. He calls out in the wilderness saying, "God is at work here. New life is emerging here." He calls that out to despairing people who are longing for new life. He calls it out and as he does so we are reminded of our baptism, the waters by which we have life. John's message may be hard for some to hear and may seem to contradict this week's emphasis on loving joy. But, imagine—this man in the wilderness is crying out for the people and standing with them in the waters of baptism, for the sake of their salvation calling out for new life, light in the face of darkness. What a deep, loving joy this disciple had for the people of God.

In baptism, in song, in nature we grow in love and grow toward love. Thanks be to God.