



ADVENT WEEK 3 | JOY

December 11, 2022

PRELUDE | *Joy to the World* (All songs found on the [Advent Resource Page](#))

WELCOME | Announcements (Homeless Donations, Advent & Christmas Resources, December Calander, Needs Email) & Advent's Plea

Faith is waiting; faith is an expectancy that God has, will, and is acting in the world, in our lives. And in that way, faith is paying attention, letting our hearts and heads and hands anticipate the hope of presence and person of peace as we go about our daily living. But here is the thing, while our culture trains us in expectation—expecting life to work out in our favor or at least for things in life to work for our favor—our culture does not train us in *waiting*. Good thing for us, each year Advent arrives!

The symbols and sounds of this season help condition us in our waiting, forming in us faith if we let them. From the tree of peace guarding the sacrificial gifts of love sure to be opened with great joy, to the stockings hung, empty but ready, if only prayerfully so, to be miraculously filled, to the candles lit and those awaiting lighting counting us down to the full view of the crescendo of our carols filling both ears and hearts. Each of these, perhaps too, familiar symbols beckons us to *wait*, to stop even as we approach the start of a new year that awaits us on the other side of Christmas' gift.

In this way, Advent, as one author notes, "is the place to stop and also the place to start. It is the place to stop and think—think back, think ahead, think deep. It is the place to start and *be*,"¹ and begin again. That's the aim of our Advent Gatherings, to be a time and place to stop and to start, to think back and ahead and deep. To be *and* begin to be something more in the dawning light of the soon-arriving year and in the faith of an ever-arriving new world.

In the assurance of hope and through the unassuming and, therefore, easily unseen person of peace, Advent has the first two weeks pleaded with us to envision a new and better world. To anticipate new and better selves, made possible by the once, again, and ever-arriving Light of Life. A light that fills the darkness of our world, and the darkness within ourselves. A light that rises up from a small flame and spills out brilliance into the darkness, like a cup overflowing with illumination—a light that is the source of life, true and whole, radiating into the world, pouring out of our lives and off our lips. Lives of bright joy even in the dark.

It is for this light of Christ that we expectantly wait, to which all the scriptures and stories, collects and corals, poems and prophets reflect, anticipating the day when all shall see, and no thing or person shall be covered by the dark. A day of true joy. And so today, as we enter the third week of Advent's season, let us stop and think, quieting our hearts and minds so that we might be and become people alive and alight in faith through the joy of the once, again, and ever-arriving Light of Life Himself with us. Let's pray.

¹ Friedrick Buechner, "Light and Dark," *The Clown In The Belfry*, 126.

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 27:1-6, 13-14

***The Lord is my light** and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

*One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, **to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.** For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock. And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of **joy**; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.*

*I **believe** that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!*

Wait for the Lord**; be strong, and let your heart take courage; **wait for the Lord!

SONG #1 | Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee

ADVENT WREATH | The Light of The World

“That same night, the night of Jesus’ birth, in amongst the other stars, a bright new star appeared. God put a special star in the sky to show where his boy was. And now he was going to send a big choir of angels to sing his happy song to the world: ‘*He’s here! He’s come! Go and see him. My little boy.*’

Now, where would you send your splendid choir? To a big concert hall, maybe? Or a palace, perhaps? God sent his to a little hillside, outside a little town, in the middle of the night...to sing for a raggedy old bunch of shepherds watching their sheep outside of Bethlehem.

In those days...people thought shepherds were no-bodies, just scruffy, smelly, old riff-raff. But God must have thought shepherds were very important indeed because they’re the ones he chose to tell *the* good news to first.

That night some shepherds were out in the open fields, warming themselves by a fire, when suddenly...standing in front of them was a huge warrior of light, blazing in the darkness.

‘Don’t be afraid of me!’ the bright shining man said. ‘I haven’t come to hurt you. I’ve come to bring you happy news of great joy for everyone everywhere. Today, in David’s town, in Bethlehem, God’s Son has been born! You can go and see him. He is sleeping in a manger.’

Behind the angel, they saw a strange glowing cloud—except it wasn’t a cloud, it was more angels...troops and troops of angels, armed with light! And they were singing a beautiful song: ‘Glory to God! To God be Fame and Honor and all the Hoorays!’

Then as quickly as they appeared, the angels left.

The shepherds stamped out their fire, left their sheep, raced down the grassy hill, through the gates of Bethlehem..to a simple home with dirt floors and a child, Heaven’s Son, the Maker of the Stars, sleeping swaddled in his mother’s arms.

This baby would be like that bright star shining in the sky that night. A Light to light up the whole world. Chasing away the darkness. Helping people to see.

And the darker the night got, the brighter the star would shine.”²

“the Lord Magnifies, enlarges my soul, **and my spirit is full of joy in God, the Savior of me**” (Luke 1:46-47)

HYMN/CAROL | *The First Noel*

DISMISS KIDS

SCRIPTURE READING | Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For those who lived in a land of deep shadows— light! Sunbursts of light!

You repopulated the nation; **you expanded its joy.** Oh, they’re so glad in your presence! Festival joy! The joy of a great celebration, *sharing rich gifts and warm greetings.*

The abuse of oppressors and cruelty of tyrants— all their whips and cudgels and curses— Is gone, done away with, a deliverance as surprising and sudden as Gideon’s old victory over Midian. The boots of all those invading troops, along with their shirts soaked with innocent blood, will be piled in a heap and burned, a fire that will burn for days!

For a child has been born—for us! The gift of a son—*for us!* He’ll take over the running of the world. His names will be: Amazing Counselor, Strong God, Eternal Father, Prince of Wholeness.

His ruling authority will grow, and **there’ll be no limits to the wholeness he brings.** He’ll rule from the historic David throne **over that promised kingdom.** He’ll put that kingdom on a firm footing and keep it going with fair dealing and right living, **beginning now and lasting always.** The zeal of God-of-the-Angel-Armies will do all this.

SONG #3 | *To Thee We Run*

² “The Light of the World” found in the *Jesus Story Book Bible*, 184-191.

SERMONETTE | Joy

We said Advent always arrives “Somewhere between the fact of darkness and the hope of light.”³ Somewhere between sin and sickness, death and depersonalization, and an ever-lingering expectancy that such is not how things should be, could be, or will be. Indeed somewhere between the fact of darkness and the hope is light is not only *where* we are when we start our countdown to Christmas but *who* we are. “We are the people who walk in darkness as to one degree or another people have always walked in darkness.”⁴ Darkness within and darkness without, not always overwhelming darkness, but darkness seemingly always near. At the same time, never is the darkness complete—without or within. Maybe the perpetual flicker of hope that lights every human heart, as faint and distant as it may appear in certain seasons and circumstances, is why the story we tell ‘year on year’ of that very special night, that first Noel, *stays with us*. A story echoed, even if only in passing allusion, in the semi-shallow stories of the season told in every medium of our culture. A story made central and explicit by all those who, whether by mere tradition or simple faith, are illuminated to something more, the truth of the tale.

“He came in winter as we tell it.” says Fredrick Buechner. “He came in the dark and cold. The only light was starlight, not enough to thread a needle by or even read a book. And only for a little while. He visited us. He paid us a visit.

It was thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away, but it is a visit that for all our madness and cynicism and indifference and despair we have never quite forgotten. The oxen in their stalls. The smell of hay. The shepherds standing around. *That* child and *that* place are somehow the closest of all encounters, the one we are closest to, the one that brings us closest to something that cannot be told in any other way⁵ but through the near fairy tale, poetic language of *faith*.

The power in the poetry of prophets like Isaiah and Luke, Mary and Malcolm Guite is that it can “show us something we think we already know,” and we think we know a lot about that night, don’t we(!) “and in that showing, show us ‘something more.’”⁶

So, as we’ve done during the first two Sundays of Advent, I want to read us a poem. But this time, rather than reading a poem that draws out something more, I want to read a poem that draws us *into* a bit of the “something more” of that first Noel. After which, we can take advantage of this third Sabbath day of Advent to rest in faith, rejoicing that in the fact of darkness, there is ever emerging a song of light and life, a song of joy.

³ Buechner, 121.

⁴ Ibid., 122.

⁵ Ibid., 124.

⁶ Malcolm Guite, *Waiting On The Word*, 111.

SONG OF THE SHEPHERDS | *Richard Bauckham*

We were familiar with the night.
We knew its favourite colours,
its sullen silence
and its small, disturbing sounds,
its unprovoked rages,
its savage dreams.

[STOP] Darkness is no stranger—to the shepherds nor you and me. And the longer we live, the more life we experience, the more familiar we are with the living nights; though, familiarity does not necessarily lead to comfort or ease the disturbing sounds, unprovoked rages, and savage dreams that come in the dark.

We slept by turns,
attentive to the flock. [Still, despite the reality of darkness, we do our jobs. Responsible and steady even in the nights.]
We said little.
Night after night, there was little to say. [Though full of colors, sounds, smells, and dreams, what really changes in the dark, in the nights that come and keep coming? What is there to talk about?]
But sometimes one of us,
skilled in that way,
would pipe a tune of how things were for us.

[STOP] On occasion, someone who has the talent (a poet, a politician, a popstar, a popper) speaks for us, says for us what we already know, sings a song of our life, or at least of who we “feel” things our, life from our view, from the dark.

They –someone other than us, outside of the “us”—say that once, almost before time,
the stars with shining voices
serenaded
the new born world.
The night could not contain their boundless praise.

[STOP] While the tune of how things “are for us” might ring true at night, there is another song deep within, nearly forgotten, that doesn’t feel quite like our own. A song almost always sung by others, but not of things as they *appear to us* but as they *were, as they might still be*. Songs that ask,

Where were you...when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:4,7)
and announce
The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the expanse proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. (Psalm 19:1-2)

Perhaps, like the shepherds, outsiders to a community's religious life, distant from such daily songs sung by sisters and brothers of faith, yet nevertheless formed by what forms them, even in the darkness, something more like “folklore” and “fairytale” continues singing a counter song in the night?

We thought that just a poem – [Don't we all! Such things are only true in fairytales and fancy words. That is,]

until the night
a song of solar glory,
unutterable, unearthly,
eclipsed the luminaries of the night,
as though the world were exorcised of dark
and, coming to itself, began again.

[STOP] There is a night in all our lives when we see what the psalmist and shepherds see,

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For those who lived in a land of deep shadows— light! Sunbursts of light!” (Isaiah 9:2)

– a light that eclipses all the lights and shows us the way to the Son—to the source of a life new—the light of a life exorcised of dark, reborn—coming to itself, *beginning again*. Do you remember that night? How long did it last? What happened next and continues happening?

Later we returned to the flock. [They, we, nearly always return to our jobs, responsibilities, and daily living, no matter how bright the revelation.]

The night was ominously black.

The stars were silent as the sheep. [The dark returns and the sky that sang so clearly and close seems closed off and only whispering its melody as before, at a distance or too far to hear at all]

Nights pass, year on year.

We clutch our meager cloaks against the cold.

Our aging piper's fumbling fingers play, [Everything seems to return to the way it was, and moves forward in the way it always does]

night after night, [yet something has changed. Instead of 'Night after night, saying little,' only occasionally singing how we see things, now the rhythm is nightly, the words always there, and different...for now]

an earthly echo of the song that banished dark. [is on our lips, flow from our hearts, is what we know, is how things are...Why? Because...]

It has stayed with us. [Heaven's song continues in our hearts and fills the darkness within and without with light. As Buechner sang, “It is still a dark world...but the darkness is different because he keeps getting born into it...brought to us [even as we] bring [him] to each other.”⁷]

⁷ Buechner, 124-125, 128.

REFLECTION / POEM

At the advent, the first arrival of Christmas, and in the many other arrivings still, “something glorious is opened up for us, we glimpse the possibility” of life outside of darkness, of life new, only to return to the work and rhythms where light’s song first found us. But, like the shepherds whose stories did not continue in the grandeur of fairytale glory, but in the nights of year on year, the light whose brilliance at one moment overwhelmed but as quickly as it came returned to the starry night is yet not overcome by the darkness. Though small, like a swaddled babe or a candle's flame, it is a light that shines on and on within us, stays with us. A light that keeps us singing for joy, echoing the songs of prophets of angels alike, until the dark is banished within and without.

Let’s take a moment to quiet our hearts and minds and still our bodies so that the words we know might draw our attention to something more—to that something more song that has stayed with us.

In the silence of this space and the solitude of your seat, prayerfully **breathe in: “God expands” and breathe out: “our joy.”**

- Allow the Spirit to bring to memory “your first noel.” (Give them a minute)
- Ask the Spirit, "Show me something more," in the poem’s rereading. (Give them a few seconds)
- Consider, “What song am I singing?” The old or the new? (Remind them at the poem’s end)

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COLLECT & COMMUNION

*Sing to the LORD a new song, his praises from the end of the earth!
let the inhabitants...sing for joy, let them shout from the tops of the mountains.*
(Isaiah 42:10-11)

“The new song is a bold assertion,” in a baby born, whose body would be broken and life poured out for others, ‘that the God of the gospel has plans and purposes and a will to reorder the world, to bring wholeness and health to the blind, the poor, the needy, to the nations so fearful, and to the entire creation...The song,” contends Walter Brueggemann, “asserts God’s future against our present tense,”⁸ is indeed, a song sung night after night that banishes the dark within and without.

COLLECT | *Third Sunday of Advent*

Merciful God, who sent your messengers, the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation, and the angels to sing of salvation's arrival: Give us grace to heed their warnings and hold on to their songs and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Through the body, blood, and life everlasting of Jesus, amen.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance*, 23.

SONG #4 | *Maranatha*

SCRIPTURE READING | Zephaniah 3:14-17

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! **Rejoice and exult with all your heart**, O daughter of Jerusalem!

The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.

On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: “Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. **The Lord your God is in your midst**, a mighty one who will save; **he will rejoice over you with gladness**; he will quiet you by his love; **he will exult over you with loud singing**.

SONG #5 | *My Savior Left His Throne Above*

SONG #6 | *Angels We Have Heard On High*

BENEDICTION | Colossians 1:9-14

Be assured that from the first day we heard of you, we haven’t stopped praying for you, asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will, and so acquire a thorough understanding of the ways in which God works.

We pray that you’ll live well for the Master, making him proud of you as you work hard in his orchard. **As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do *your* work.** We pray that you’ll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is **strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy**, thanking the Father who makes us **strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful** that he has for us. God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He’s set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating.