

**Summary:**

“Prepare Him Room: Hopeful Joy,” the first in our series for Advent  
“Heaven and Nature Sing,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the  
Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, December 1, 2019

**Detail:**

Having grown up in the age of the Apollo moon missions, I have  
always been fascinated with space travel, outer space, and  
astronomy.

During the space flights of my childhood I watched eagerly as news  
anchor Walter Cronkite and astronaut Wally Schirra chronicled on  
CBS our nation’s ongoing journey, as President Kennedy had laid out  
years before, *“to land a man on the moon and return him again safely to the earth.”* I  
watched it all.

Rather than pretend to be a soldier, a cowboy, or an athlete, I donned  
a white sweatshirt and sweatpants, wrapped saran wrap across the  
face mask of a football helmet, and somehow attached a vacuum  
cleaner hose to both my helmet and a backpack to create my own  
space suit.

Our car at the time was one of those station wagons with the tinted  
window in the ceiling of the second row seats, where I would sit with  
my legs draped over the seat back and the seatbelt strapped across  
my upside down body and look up and out the window of my own  
Apollo command module as we drove around my hometown.

I was all in!

In college the only *real* science class I took was Astronomy. As the moon missions gave way to Sky Lab, and then to the Space Shuttle, my attraction and excitement never waned, it only grew.

As our nation's attention moved beyond the moon to the expanse of the planets of our solar system with the Voyager, Mariner, and Cassini explorers and the Hubble Space Telescope, my fascination with these heavenly bodies grew as well.

As a child I had copied by hand charts and tables from encyclopedia about the numbers of moons orbiting the various planets or the distances between the Sun and the planets. I still have them. But it was only when I actually did the math, long hand, not on a calculator or computer, to determine just how far a light year actually was, that I began to comprehend just how expansive and almost incomprehensible the distances in our universe really are. What we can actually see with our naked eyes or through even the most powerful of telescopes, all of the planets and stars and comets and nebulae and all of the physical matter that makes up what we think of as outer space, is less than 1% of all that is there.

Something like 99% of all that is "out there" is what scientists call either "dark matter" or "dark energy."

That doesn't mean it's a *Star Wars* kind of dark side of the force thing - it means it can't be seen in a telescope. We can't touch it or measure it. But we know it's there because of how all of the other things in the vast universe react to it. Like gravity, we can't see it, we can only see it's effect.

Now, moving from the macro to the micro, from the vastness of space to the minutiae of simple lifeforms, beneath the forrest floor lies

a tangle of roots and fungi called mycorrhiza, also known as “the wood wide web.” The popular podcast Radiolab has a great episode on mycorrhiza and in the synopsis they describe the unbelievable organism in this way:

“a strange creature that burrows beneath forests, building an underground network where deals are made and lives are saved (and lost) in a complex web of friendships, rivalries, and business relations.

It’s a network that scientists are only just beginning to untangle and map, and it’s not only turning our understanding of forests upside down, it’s leading some researchers to rethink what it means to be intelligent.”

This extraordinary network of tiny tubes allows for species to share information and resources.

It truly sustains and nurtures the life of the forest.

It seems then a fitting image for today, a way to help us think about the kind of joy at the heart of this series. Joy that is steadfast and faithful. Joy that, like an unseen force, both courses through the expanse of the cosmos and is also built into the very microscopic cells of our bodies, nurturing and sustaining life regardless of our attention to it. On the surface of things, our world looks bleak. How can we look underneath the surface?

How can we look beyond the big, obvious things to see what’s behind them? How can we connect to and abide in a deep and hopeful joy?

One of my guiding texts for this series is a book that I believe some of you studied last year, *The Book of Joy*, by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama.

This wonderful book was part of my daily devotional reading this fall and there was much that resonated with me as I considered questions of gratitude, hope, and joy going into Advent this year. One of those things was the idea of the difference between happiness and joy.

Many think of these two similarly, even interchangeably, but in reality they are very different and come from two different places.

Bishop Tutu explains,

“Joy is much bigger than happiness. While happiness is often seen as being dependent on external circumstances, joy is not.” -

(Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Joy*, pg 3)

In the midst of dealing with my recent cold-turned-sinus-infection-turned-bronchitis, I was told that the cold medication I was taking was elevating my blood pressure, so they prescribed something different that wouldn't have such an adverse effect.

And that made me remember something I was told about the systolic and diastolic numbers of our blood pressure measurements: the top number, I was told, indicates that you're having either a good day or a bad day, the bottom number indicates whether you're having either a good life or bad life.

One is a kind of reactionary picture, the other a more foundational image of how we are.

Happiness and Joy are, in some ways, similar to that. Happiness is a measure of how we react to what's going on around us: we get to see our grandkids, we enjoy a nice dinner with friends, our 401K increased in value over the last quarter, the sermon isn't too long.

Things, events, make us happy or not happy.

Joy, on the other hand, comes from things that are more foundational to our lives, things like our faith, or our attitude, gratitude, and degrees of compassion.

Thought of another way, things that bring us happiness are things that sort of describe "how" we are, while our level of joy might be more closely tied to how we consider "who" we are. And this is tied to hope.

In her commentary on our Isaiah passage for today, theologian Rev. Barbara Lundblad points out the vast difference between the picture painted in chapter 1 and that portrayed in chapter 2. She writes,

"In chapter 1 Isaiah graphically laid out what he had seen: violence, bribery, unfaithfulness, desolation, trampling on the poor. There are brief interruptions as God calls for repentance and offers glimpses of hope, but they are drowned out by these pictures of violence and rebellion.

"Then Chapter 2 opens as though Isaiah is starting all over again -- or God is. What Isaiah sees is not taking place now, but 'in the days to come.' People of every nation will stream to Mt. Zion, including those who were enemies of Israel and Judah. God's instruction will go forth

from Jerusalem; God will judge between the nations. The people will be transformed by this teaching.

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore.*

Like many of the images we see during this Advent season, Isaiah's picture of swords turned to plowshares seems absurd. Maybe, Isaiah's vision will be true in a far-off time, some distant utopian future, but for now, there's nothing we can do but pray, "God of Peace, bring an end to the war in Syria. Lord, in your mercy, HEAR OUR PRAYER."

Isaiah saw a temple high in the mountains where disputes are settled peacefully, swords turned into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks.

The weapons of war become tools for cultivation. Through images, Isaiah offers the people of Jerusalem a new perspective, one that offers hope during times of war and despair.

People around the world, regardless of their station in life or their economic well-being, long for joy and hope, but sometimes it can be hard to see or find - either so vast like the space between the planets that we can't comprehend it, or so small like the mycorrhiza beneath our feet that we take it for granted.

So, perhaps we need something more concrete to help us see where joy lives, and where joy cultivates hope.

One concrete way that we, in the church, connect to deep joy is through our rituals. The scripture from the book of Romans reminds us to “put on Christ.”

This is a call to remember our baptism, our initiation into a community called to be the hands and feet of Christ in a broken world, a world like the one described in Isaiah chapter 1. In baptism, we are given a foundational reminder of who we are. Our place as beloved children of God is affirmed by the Holy Spirit in the presence of the larger community, and that community in turn covenants to never let us forget who we are and whose we are.

It is a covenant, a ritual based on hope for a future that is unseen, but that is anticipated, is expected, because it is promised by God.

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.

As the Romans passage calls us to “wake from our sleep,” that “the night is almost over and the day is near,” we are called in this time between the darkness of night and the light of day to “wake up and get dressed,” to put on Christ, to clothe ourselves in Christ, to remember our baptism and be thankful - thankful for who we are and for whose we are, and for the hope that comes from remembering that we are made in the image of the God who created both the heavenly magnitude as well as the infinitesimal. In our baptism we are ordained to the work of the Gospel - the work of grinding away at sharp edges, creating plows and pruning hooks, cultivating hope and peace.

In baptism we take ON Christ. In holy communion, another of our beloved rituals, we take IN Christ.

The old maxim is that “we are what we eat.”

When we take in Christ, our hope is to become more Christlike. In Wesleyan theology we profess that we expect to be made perfect in love, but only through the power of Jesus Christ. That is our hope!

That is God’s vision for us! That is the dream!

So, while Advent is a time of anticipation, it is not a time of passive waiting. We can wait around hopelessly for the right tools for the job or we can step up in hope and create 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 can be buffeted by the day to day events of our lives and our world, or we can work through the gifts we’ve been given to help make room for the promised Christ child. How do we help to usher in new light, new insight, new perspectives?

Isaiah isn’t naïve. He is not a Pollyanna prophet.

This vision of weapons of war turned into agricultural tools, images of death-dealing turned into food-producing is a promise for “the days to come.”

But biblical visions in both testaments come to us from the future, longing to shape the days in which we are living. Proleptic theology espouses the idea that, rather than what happens today being exclusively guided by what happened in the past, that in fact God is out ahead of us, pulling us forward towards God’s ideal and perhaps, already completed future.

When we talk about the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Reign of God, when we consider Isaiah's vision of the lion and lamb lying down together, this is not a fanciful, child-like game of make believe we're playing.

No, this is giving voice to the vision of God given to us in Scripture, spoken through the prophets, and enfleshed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, toward which God gently pulls us, leads us, encourages us, just as a parent gently encourages the first steps of a toddling child.

Our world is walking, toddling if you will, ever more slowly toward the outstretched arms of a God who desires nothing but hope and joy for us, all the days of our lives. A proleptic view of Advent is one that sees both the already and the not yet.

The world where swords are beaten into plowshares is not beyond our grasp, but for some it is beyond their imagination. But that is why we gather.

To prepare him room. To prepare him room to show us, in the macro and the micro, the hope that awaits in the kingdom, the community of God, that is at once already here and yet to come.

True joy is not something we can pursue on it's own - it is something that comes as a result of being who we are created to be. Advent is a time for preparing ourselves and our world to receive the gift that answers for us the questions, who are we, whose are we, and from where does our hope come? So may you, in the weeks of this Advent season, prepare him room in your heart and in your life to receive the gift of Hopeful Joy. Amen.

