

Let's be honest this Advent

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The theme we are drawing from – *How does a weary world rejoice?* – was sparked by a group of creative women who offer the resource that is our basis for Advent worship this year.¹ It was a poem, actually, talking about how, in the midst of the real feelings of Christmas which inevitably includes grief, anger, hopelessness, joy also emerges. Being real, when our consumer-driven culture tries to keep us happy, keep us coveting this or that wonderful product or movie. That can be really difficult. But that is Advent work – being honest.

“How does a weary world rejoice” may seem familiar to you. Those of you who are musical may have sung this line that came from the famous Christmas Hymn – *O Holy Night*. An interesting story behind “O Holy Night”, the song was originally written by a French poet who happened also to be an atheist. The music was supplied by a Jewish composer.² The hymn was later translated into English by an American Unitarian minister, and, in the 1800s, *O Holy Night* became a popular hymn for Christian abolitionists due to its justice-focused language in verse 3 – take a look at the lyrics, you can “Google” or “Bing” them, if you know that that means – take a look at the back story, for the 3rd verse is bursting with justice and joy, like the Song of Mary, otherwise known as the Magnificat, her proclamation after the angel Gabriel announced that she was to give birth. This is a vision of God’s kin dom, a new order to come to earth as in heaven.

Finding Joy in wearying times can be an act of resistance. Can we dare to believe this in such anxious times? Can we embrace a joy *in the midst, alongside, the grief?* It might be helpful to try to define, Joy, in contrast to a commonly used term, happiness. I think that they are quite different, how about you?

Joy to me means daring to believe that healing will come. Happiness, to me quite different, implies a learned, even a programmed response to pain. Perhaps as it happens in our everyday lives, an escape from sadness – avoiding the pain.

Joy, I think, comes surprisingly in moments when someone near and dear to us has died, and the pain we feel is palpable. Or, it emerges after the diagnosis from the specialist, news that that feels like a blow to the stomach. The joy might come when a friend sits with us as we digest the news, the grief, and they hold our hand – we talk, uncensored, and we feel connected. We might even share a moment of humour – a glimmer of joy alongside, or in the midst of, grief.

In today’s Gospel story³, Elizabeth has carried the pain of ancient and modern women, unable to give birth. But then, this shocking news, that she is to have a baby. Zechariah,

¹ To see more about the resource, you can find it at <https://sanctifiedart.org/>

² Poem written by Placide Cappeau in French. Later, composer Adolphe Adam would compose the music for the poem in 1847, and the song be translated to English by John Sullivan Dwight. You can find the lyrics on many websites, including <https://genius.com/Christmas-songs-o-holy-night-lyrics>

³ Our reading today from the 1st chapter of Luke, found at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A5-23&version=CEB>

the father-to-be, he just can't believe it. He just can't, and he is relegated to be mute until the baby is born.

Unbelievable possibilities interwoven within the horrific, painful, demoralizing, maddening realities of our lives. Can we dare to allow joy and hope to emerge? In Gaza? Can Jews and Muslims around the world who live in fear because of a spike in Antisemitism and Islamophobia dare to believe that joy might come? How about in Ukraine as the attacks from Russia relentlessly continue?

Wherever you are tempted to gloss over your own pain, your loss, your grief, your hurt – can you and I allow glimmers of joy in? Maybe it is when a friend refuses to leave you alone when you don't answer their calls. Perhaps it is the purr of a cat that is relentless in its need for connection; it will not leave us alone as we try to soldier on, working, grieving. Maybe joy comes out of the scene outside your window, beautiful birds perching at the feeder.

Joy is resistance. It is God's kin dom breaking into our moments of pain, not to make the pain go away, but to help us work through the grief. Amen? Amen.