

“I Will Greatly Rejoice!”

New London UMC

Sun., Dec. 27, 2020

Galatians 4:4-7; Psalm 148; Isaiah 61:10—62:3 NRSV

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I realize that most of us have had a very abnormal Christmas celebration. We shipped gifts, talked on the phone, or had video chats with loved ones that we would normally have spent time with in person. We decorated, made cookies and candies, fixed holiday meals, and opened gifts at a distance. We watched worship services, listened to recorded music, and maybe took part in a flash mob. It was all very safe, and yet it was all rather unsatisfying and disjointed.

And perhaps you’ve found yourself doing what I have done this year as we’ve read the gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth: I’ve heard them anew in the context of a pandemic; and thought how the story would change because of a pandemic. Gathering in your hometown and stacking people up at the local inns because of a census count? Not going to happen! Mary and Joseph should have qualified for a travel exemption and never left Nazareth. . . . And would we have welcomed ANY strangers to meet our newborn son? I don’t think so! All those shepherds shouldn’t have left their field. And what’s written in the stars is that the magi needed to stay home and just sent a nice card or gift package to the new king who was born. Wouldn’t the heavenly host have handled the air freight? And don’t they have gift cards for gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

So much has changed in how we perceive things this year, but what probably wouldn’t have changed in this story would be the sense of relief in knowing that Mary and Jesus had survived that dangerous passage of childbirth. A lot of things could have gone very wrong, but they didn’t. So don’t you think that Mary and Joseph would have thanked God and rejoiced that this birth went well? And then, in the days after his birth, they probably fell more deeply in love with Jesus as they continued to marvel over this precious gift of God with them. I’m pretty sure that part of the story wouldn’t change, pandemic or no pandemic.

This is also the part of the story that we long to enter into, isn’t it? We all want to say, “Pass the baby, Mary! We want to hold the baby!” We want to feel how soft his skin is, and see how impossibly small his fingers and toes are. We want to coo and cuddle Jesus, and rejoice in our hearts over the miracle of his birth. Because this year we keenly miss that physical connection. We long to feel that vulnerable weight in our arms. We can’t believe how long it has been since we were able to hold onto the incarnate God-with-us in the shape of a new grandchild, or cousin, or niece, or nephew, or neighbor’s child, or friend of a friend’s baby. We miss not being able to take our turn in holding a baby, and not having a baby gurgling, or crying, or beaming in the midst of a loving gathering of family and friends. We miss being together to celebrate a new life. We miss rejoicing over new life in these days of mourning too many new deaths and hospitalizations.

While we all WANT to feel like rejoicing – there hasn't been much for us to rejoice over this year. . . . Or could it be that it only *seems* like we haven't had much to rejoice over?! When I took some time to think about this it wasn't long before I realized that there were many things to rejoice over in my life this year:

- I've been able to stay healthy in the midst of surges of COVID-19. No small feat. And I've been able to change some of my breathing habits – which has led to consistently lower blood pressure and better sleep each night. I can rejoice for good health!
- I'm employed full-time with benefits – and that hasn't changed despite the 'safer at home order' and the ongoing need to have online worship instead of in-person worship services. Many people in our community and country are not as fortunate as I have been, and they have not been able to stay employed through these long months of changing restrictions and new public health requirements. I rejoice that I can still work and have the means to help other people.
- I have a comfortable, safe place to live; food to eat; and family and friends who still send me Christmas cards! These are all significant gifts in my life, and I rejoice that I am blessed so richly and in so many ways.
- I've been able to learn new ways of doing things in a relatively short period of time. Who knew that a web cam for my office computer and a Zoom account would become necessary tools for ministry this year? I rejoice that I've been able to handle the steepness of the learning curve – even if I've done it awkwardly – and been able to invite others to learn along with me.
- I have been encouraged by the socially distanced conversations that we've had about what it means to be white, and what we take for granted in our lives that are not a 'given' for others. I am grateful that our District Superintendent Rev. Tsuker Yang sent a link to the free online resource "Race and Christianity in the United States" by Sarah Ruble, an associate professor of religion at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota (www.sarahruble.com), which provided more opportunities for discussion on Zoom – and that this resource is one you can share with people you know. I am also glad that our United Methodist denomination has taken a clear stand against racism and committed to being actively anti-racist. I can rejoice that I am getting a clearer perspective of how privileged and biased I am, and how I can change to be more anti-racist and bias aware.
- I have been very impressed and blessed by the generosity of members who have sewn facemasks for our congregation, for the Headstart kids, and New London School District students, and other people. While we'd all like to believe that being vaccinated for COVID-19 will take us back to "the way things used to be" – the reality is that we will still need to wear facemasks in public for months and months to come. I rejoice that we have facemasks available to us so we can wear them and help keep each other healthy.
- I have been grateful for our congregation's ability to provide 160 households with a turkey, pie, and cranberry sauce at Thanksgiving – and for our ongoing relationship with

the Community Cupboard. Because of this relationship our church's freezers are available for the Community Cupboard to use as off-site storage, and they can now accept donations they wouldn't have been able to fit in the limited freezer space at the Washington Center. With more households in our community in need of food assistance it is a blessing to be able to help ensure that the Community Cupboard can meet the need. I rejoice that this is part of our ministry in and with our community.

I could go on – and I hope that you can also go on and on and on with the ways we can rejoice. That you would also feel that the prophet Isaiah speaks for us when he says: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God”! And that the psalmist is correct in saying that everyone and everything in, on, and throughout the earth and heavens can join together in praising the LORD. And that the apostle Paul is correct that we have every reason to praise God for sending his Son so that we would no longer be slaves to sin, but will instead live as the adopted children of God. Praise the LORD!

Amen.