

## *Though You Have Considered All the Facts*

*Wendell Berry, Manifesto: Mad Farmer Liberation Front*

*“Trouble don’t last always”*

*Sanderford Family Saying*

December 13, 2020

The Reverend Jay Sanderford, Associate Pastor

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*Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11*

*Psalms 126*

*John 1: 6-8, 19-28*

Long before Advent was a word, it was a sigh. A voice weeping. A mood. A heart broken. And never more intensely felt than in these anxious mid-December days. Advent expresses both the fatigue and the joyful hope of God’s people, when the meaning of our lives is expressed in a tired exhalation of ordinary breath followed by the sharp intake of something greater.

The poetry and art and prayers and hymns of this season all begin with a cry for deliverance. It was first voiced not by a poet or hymn writer but by a prophet: “O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down” (Is. 64:1). It is reflected in this tenth century Gregorian prayer, “Stir up your power, O Lord, and come to us today. Rescue and protect us from the threatening perils of our sins by your might. . .”<sup>1</sup>

“O... Lord.” This Advent is a season of grief, of what can rightly be called an advent of *acedia*, the ancient deadly sin of sloth, or our present mood of listlessness, apathy and melancholia.<sup>2</sup> The church’s challenge in Advent is usually to prevent the vast Christmas machine from stampeding our hearts, minds and spirits over the cliff of commercial conviviality. Honestly I don’t believe that it will be a challenge to mark an authentic Advent this year; the pandemic has imposed a dual sense of both melancholy and anticipation for what God will do next.

If the prophets and poets are right about us, and I sense that they are, then for whom do we Christians sigh in this Advent? For whom do we dream and for what? We dream for Emmanuel, the God who-is-with us. The ancient church waited for the final reckoning of the Lord with fasting, prayer and repentance. Our forbearers

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<sup>1</sup> [A Collection of Prayers](#), Collect for the First Sunday in Advent, Gregorian, 10th Century, Paul C. Stratman (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, First Edition, Sept. 8, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> “Acedia,” Online Medical Dictionary, 2000.

sang, “Come thou long-expected Jesus.” But today we do not long for a second coming that would bring our world to a final end so much as we pray for the in-breaking of Christ that will allow our world to continue.<sup>3</sup>

Advent is the doorway to the incarnation, when God changed tack about what it means to be God, and went all-in, and chose a maximum and unconditional investment in the human ecosystem. And so it was that Jesus was born in the days when an overhyped Roman emperor named Caesar ruled nearly everything and a political nonentity named Quirinius administered Syria and an even lesser light, Herod, oversaw the kingdom of Israel. Jesus was born into that world, the same world that we occupy—a world of gloom, misgovernment, and indescribable splendor, a planet on which we make and take out the garbage, do our laundry in the basement, and watch for the northern lights in the December sky. Advent pays close attention to this world into which Jesus came, and it takes it seriously. Every Advent we ask, “What is it about our world that made Jesus’ coming necessary?” And, then thoughtfully, we ponder “How are we changed as a result of his coming?”

John the Baptist plays a matchless role in our Advent story. Not as a prophet of joy, of course, for that would be out of character for such a cryptic, hard-edged figure, but as a unique witness to what God is doing in Jesus Christ. Scripture declares that God sent John, and no one other than John is sent by God in such a unique way. John grounds all the beautiful images of the first words of John’s Gospel—Word made flesh, light shining in the darkness, glory—full of grace and truth—in the here and now. John places the one who has existed from the beginning of time—Jesus the Christ—in history, our history, in our lives. John places the Word through whom all things came into being in a specific place, with a particular Google address: in “Bethany [from] across the Jordan where John was baptizing.” The good news that John brings into our world, our lives, is that Jesus is present with us, with all humanity, in the here-and-now. The very light of God is in this confused, politically divided, racially complex, and coronavirus-infested world.

God sent us John because God knows the world around us is often dark and fearsome. And that we sometimes need someone outrageous to point Jesus out to us when we have trouble seeing the light and feeling the joy. For though the darkness cannot overcome the light, the darkness, can be pretty thick. So God sends witnesses like John to point us to the light.

The distinctive portrait of John the Baptist makes clear that God sends the light that brings life; we do not have to conjure the light or create life for ourselves. John’s call for repentance is to bring people to Jesus is not the prescription by which we save ourselves. No, the repentance we take up in our deep Advent sighs is the grace that brings us the joy of new, splendid hope.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, we have wisdom, first from the Psalmist, then from John, and then finally from Paul, about a counterintuitive way to live in this disheveled world. It begins, according to the Psalmist, with a sign of an imminent restoration in the midst of an experience of massive exilic disruption, much like the good news that has flooded the world this week with the appearance of an effective vaccine against the coronavirus. Laughter and shouts of **joy** are signs of coming restoration, so says the Psalmist:

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<sup>3</sup> Lisher, Richard, “Advent is a Season of sighs, especially this year.” *Christian Century*, Nov. 24, 2020.



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*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. -- Psalm 126:1*

I don’t know if you saw it but when Margaret Keenan received the first Pfizer-Covid-19 vaccine early on Tuesday morning in Coventry, England, she could not suppress a wry chuckle. The drama of being the first person in the world to be jabbed with a vaccine needle brought out a spontaneous touch of delight at the global sense of hope that was unfolding around her.

A handful of verses from the oldest book in the New Testament, Thessalonians, speak a similar contra-indicated truth in this season of deep, soul-shaking sighs:

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. I Thessalonians 5:16-17*

These verses come from Paul’s first letter, and are addressed to a community he particularly loved. And as our community today eagerly awaits a fresh common life, and an end to the massive suffering, the church in Thessalonica was waiting impatiently for restoration as well. And what does Paul advise in those anxious times? **“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”** Rejoice? It seems like misplaced instruction but it leads me to wonder if joy isn’t really muscle that invites us to exercise it.

John Calvin, Swiss pastor, theologian and architect of our Presbyterian lineage, was fond of saying, **“There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice.”**<sup>4</sup> On his most recent visit to the United States in 2015 I recall that Pope Francis began his message by audaciously reminding Christians to rejoice:

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion, John T. McNeill, ed., and Ford Lewis Battles, translator. (Westminster Press, Louisville, 1960).

Paul tells us to rejoice; he practically orders us to rejoice. This command resonates with the desire we all have for a fulfilling life, a meaningful life, a joyful life. It is as if Paul could hear what each one of us is thinking in his or her heart and to voice what we are feeling, what we are experiencing. Something deep within us invites us to rejoice and tells us not to settle for placebos [which simply keep us comfortable].<sup>5</sup>

Observing the liturgical year that marks the third Sunday of Advent on which joy is expressed at center stage can reframe our mindset. Surpassing individual sorrows and sharing in communal rejoicing are ways of proclaiming something fundamentally true: that we have good reason to rejoice: God, in Jesus Christ, is alive and present in this moment in time. And that joy, not acedia or anxiety, have the last word. Rev. Talitha Arnold, a Yale classmate, says plainly that “joy comes where it has no business being. Joy comes not from our deserving, but from God’s doing.” It also helps to remember that joy, even great joy, is sometimes quiet. Joy isn’t just an emotion; it is a way of knowing. “All joy reminds,” wrote C.S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy*. It confirms what we know and what we believe about who God is and who we are created to be. It reminds us that we were loved into being by a love that is far greater than any other force in this world, and that we are accompanied and watched over on our journeys and that our sorrows will melt into tremendous delight when we “arrive again at where we started” this life.

But face it folks, the facts are grim. And the list is long and growing. The winter looks dark; global temperatures are rising steadily, severe weather events are becoming more common and more extreme; species are becoming extinct at an alarming rate; rainforests are vanishing; slavery has not been abolished nor its legacy reconciled; extreme poverty continues and injustice and the Proud Boys roam the streets. Innocent people are killed and their homes demolished when wealthy nations go to war for strategic reasons. It’s hard to take in the news without being overwhelmed.

Wendell Berry, whose poem “Manifesto, Mad Farmer Liberation Front” does consider all the facts and yet can witness to the presence of deep joy gives us a way forward.<sup>6</sup> He has spoken prophetically to many generations about the economic, community and environmental disasters created by greed, short-sightedness and the substitution of “ownership” for “stewardship” as a goal for our corporate and personal life. Berry describes the looming catastrophes we are aware of: losing relationship to the earth and the natural processes, environmental racism, soil depletion, mountaintop removal, unbridled prejudice, overconsumption and the dilapidation of community. His long life as both a farmer and writer offers a rich example what it means to “rejoice though you have considered all the facts.”

It’s not a simple, glib line of verse. Joy that survives all the bleak statistics of a dark winter, of isolation born when dear families are unable to gather ‘round the Christmas tree and there are no visits to the care facility to sing carols of good tidings and joy. This kind of joy is the fruit of practical faith—the kind of faith that Berry witnessed to when he wrote that “work done faithfully and well is prayer.” Joy is also the fruit of endurance and

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, visit to the United States, Sept. 23, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Berry, Wendell, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” from [The Country of Marriage](#) (Counterpoint, 2013 Reprint Edition).



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patience, formed in communities of people who care for each other, laughing over each other’s missteps, listening deeply to each other’s stories, investing in each other’s children and grandchildren, grieving each other’s dings and losses and living together “through tragedy into celebration and joy.”

This sort of rejoicing may be possible only in the context of human connections struck, forged and welded in love, grace and forgiveness. It may be possible only by clinging to Jesus’ evocative promise and reassurance: “in the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” In light of that promise, we can afford to consider all the facts and yet rejoice.

Beyond our relationships with each other, there is the quiet glory and inspiration of the natural world. In another place, Wendell Berry writes this: “There is not only peacefulness [in this world], there is joy. And the joy, less deniable in its evidence than the peacefulness, is the confirmation of it. I sat one summer evening and watched a great blue heron make his descent from the top of the hill into the valley. He came down at a measured deliberate pace, stately as always, like a dignitary going down a stair. And then, at a point I judged to be midway over the river, without at all varying his wingbeat he did a backward turn in the air, a loop-the-loop. It could only have been a gesture of pure exuberance, of joy — a speaking of his sense of the evening, the day’s fulfillment, his descent homeward. He made just that one slow turn, and then flew on out of sight in the direction of the slow farther down in the bottom. The movement was incredibly beautiful, at once exultant and stately, a benediction on the evening and on the river and on me. It seemed so perfectly to confirm the presence of a free nonhuman joy in the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Last Sunday afternoon, I was walking with my Labrador Retrievers in Hudson Mills Park. We were walking the path along the waters of the Huron River when I spotted a great heron flying low along the river, gliding effortlessly above the surface. I watched as the heron turned flew back upstream in our direction and I was left to wonder what this great bird knew of joy.

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<sup>7</sup> Berry, Wendell, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays* (Counterpoint: First Edition, April 1, 2002).