

*“Joy To The World”*

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages  
December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
*Christmas Eve*

John 1:1-14, Luke 1:26-38, Luke 1:39-45, Luke 1:46-55, Matthew 1:18-25,  
Luke 2:1-7, Matthew 2:1-10, Luke 2:8-20, Matthew 2:11-12

*And the angel said to them,*

*“Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy  
which will come to all the people...”*

*Luke 2:10<sup>a</sup>*

Let us pray... O God,

When the shepherds saw your angel, their first reaction was to be afraid,

but your angel told them, “Fear not!” and then promised them ‘great joy’...

Help us to acknowledge that there is trouble in this world –

and that we don’t face it alone, because you also faced it.

Help us to employ hospitality to stranger and friend alike

and may we be surprised by joy in the process.

Amen

Christmas is finally here! Well... almost !

Hopefully, you have done all your cards and gotten gifts picked out, wrapped,  
stamped, and sent on their way,

and preparations made for family & friends to stay with you

or to travel to be with them, and the big meal with all the fixings is set to go

or that a reservation has been made for the Chinese restaurant.

With all those concerns going on and preparations in place,

thank you all for being here for church this Christmas Eve.

Don’t we anxiously look forward to the holidays to experience that wonder  
that everybody talks about and that we hope to get a glimpse of?

Oh, and don’t we look forward to the holidays with the anxiousness of anxiety  
for how well things go to plan without everybody being disappointed  
for one reason or another?

There’s the usual angst, but then there are those times when things go wrong  
and there is tragedy and loss that has nothing to do with the holiday itself,  
but is forever tied to that time of year.

We all experience loss at some point in our lives, but when tragedy happens  
around a holiday, a time when we expect life to be good and the world  
to be on its best behavior – and yet it is not,  
this can be especially painful and isolating...

For the passed few months, several of us have been meeting to explore  
how we might incorporate the UCC initiative of ‘Widening the Welcome’.

Basically, this is an expansion of other UCC initiatives like

being ‘Open & Affirming’ and the ‘Sacred Conversation on Race’.

‘Widening The Welcome’ is about being open to people who are challenged  
by grief, depression, or dementia.

Willard, p.2

It is a challenge for us all to find a saner world...  
through simple hospitality.

‘No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey –  
you are welcome here.’

That is what we say as a church every Sunday as a reminder  
of God’s radical love for us and the love we should show to one another.

Advent is about journeys and about hospitality:

There was the journey of Joseph & Mary – who was pregnant,  
as they went to be enrolled for the Roman census and  
were dependent on the kindness of strangers.

There was the journey of the magi from lands far away  
to pay homage to some other people’s messiah – the Jewish messiah  
whom they believed to be a blessing for all people;  
and these magi likewise benefitted from the hospitality and generosity  
they received from strangers.

There was the journey of this young family with their precious baby –  
the Son of God, as they fled from the hostility of others  
to find sanctuary in another land.

In a way, we need to see Christmas as being in its most elemental way  
more like what is called ‘Blue Christmas’.

Now, that is not to be equated with the song of the same name by Elvis Presley,  
though he is singing about the bittersweet longing for love.

Blue Christmas is about the acknowledgement of the pain and isolation  
that people may feel at holiday times when cheerfulness seems expected.

Blue Christmas is also about joy where joy is not the same thing as “being happy”.

Christmas for the family of Christ – Joseph & Mary and their newborn baby,  
was in the midst of a pretty desperate situation.

Not only was there no room at the inn,  
but modern archaeology suggests that there were no inns !

It is believed that homeowners maintained a guest room  
for relatives and sojourners – which means that in Bethlehem,  
there were no rooms anywhere on that silent night,  
not even guest rooms for relatives !

Yet they found a feed trough which they repurposed  
as a makeshift cradle.

They did their best, though this could not be said to be even ‘good’ accommodations,  
this was still a big accomplishment, because it would be just enough  
to protect their baby from exposure to the elements –  
and safeguard the promise of hope for peace on Earth, goodwill to all  
from God through Christ ...

Willard, p.3

That is the stuff that 'joy' is made of –

finding just enough to get you through a hard time,  
to get you to a safe place after a long journey,  
to get you through a storm or a sickness,  
to get you through to the next paycheck,  
to get you through the next hour  
and be grateful.

Not just for yourself, but 'joy' is also found in what you give away  
for someone else's sake – radical hospitality to stranger and friend alike.

It is when we forget ourselves in the process of doing something  
bigger than ourselves as an act of love for others –  
especially in spite of terrible circumstances,  
such that we can still be surprised by joy.

So, the key to "joy" is in giving and thanksgiving.

Therefore, the real gift and message of Christmas  
includes the message of Blue Christmas – which is to say that:  
We need to acknowledge when people are going through a hard time.  
and welcome them like the family of Jesus; and  
when we are the ones going through the trouble ourselves,  
then we need to remember that joy shows up,  
even in the midst of desperate circumstances  
just like it did on that first Christmas Eve.

Amen

Luke 2:8-20

- <sup>8</sup> And in that region there were shepherds out in the field,  
keeping watch over their flock by night.
- <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them,  
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,  
and they were filled with fear.
- <sup>10</sup> And the angel said to them,  
“Be not afraid;  
for behold,  
I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people;  
<sup>11</sup> for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,  
who is Christ the Lord.
- <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you:  
you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths  
and lying in a manger.”
- <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel  
a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,  
<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among  
[all] with whom he is pleased!”
- <sup>15</sup> When the angels went away from them into heaven,  
the shepherds said to one another,  
“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened,  
which the Lord has made known to us.”
- <sup>16</sup> And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph,  
and the babe lying in a manger.
- <sup>17</sup> And when they saw it  
they made known the saying which had been told them  
concerning this child;
- <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.  
<sup>19</sup> But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.
- <sup>20</sup> And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God  
for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.