

The Tightrope of Advent
The Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2021, 9:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

And just like that, it's the Third Sunday of Advent. The season that began a few short weeks ago with "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" and the lighting of the first candle on the Advent wreath is speeding right along ... and this morning we light the third candle as a sign of just how quickly it is going.

For liturgical Christians, candles on the Advent Wreath are part of the ritual of preparation for the coming of the Light of God's Love into the world in the person of Jesus — the refugee baby born in a manger because there was no room anywhere else for his marginalized family.

This Advent, those sparks of light on the wreath have a particular poignancy as we cannot hide from the fact that our nation is increasingly polarized, our democracy is inarguably under threat, that liberty and justice for all remains a pledge we make rather than a reality we live -- and that over it all looms the existential challenge of the climate crisis that threatens this fragile Earth, our island home. And we cannot ignore that we dwell in the shadow of a pandemic that may be loosening its grip but still holds us and those we love in a kind of ongoing limbo of vulnerability.

Nevertheless -- in this Advent season which Katharine Jefferts Schori famously named as the "time when Christians are called to have more hope than the world thinks is reasonable"-- we manifest that hope in these candles on this wreath; in our prayers prayed, in our songs sung and in our lessons read.

Which brings me to this morning's readings -- which ran the gamut from "... and again I say rejoice!" in Philippians to "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" in Luke.

I know it's officially "Joy Sunday" but I was feeling like maybe "Whiplash Sunday" might be more accurate -- and then I found these words from a recent reflection by Steven Charleston ... which are certainly preaching to me today.

*It is that time of year again:
the season of our emotional ambiguity.
Part of us wants to feel happy
and another part wants to hide.*

It is a season of cross-currents.

*Sad anniversaries
mixed with wonderful memories.
Our genuine desire to celebrate a vision of peace with others,*

but also a need to withdraw and heal.

Welcome to the tightrope.

Let's cross it together.

*All of us who are sad,
and all of us who are happy,
and all of us somewhere in-between.*

*We can cross over this transition together,
with love our balancing bar,
holding sorrow and joy in harmony.*

Let us cross together.

*For isn't that at the heart of this holy season:
finding hope anyway an ambiguous season?*

Finding hope anyway is what it means to be a people who have more hope than the world thinks is reasonable. Because at the end of the day, the good news of a God who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another is neither reasonable nor rational ... as Madeline L'Engle reminds us in her Advent poem:

*This is the irrational season
when love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
there'd have been no room for the child.*

It is also the irrational season when we are called to suspend whatever is filling us up -- reason, fear, anxiety, existential dread -- and make room for hope. For peace. And -- today -- for joy. Anyway.

And I can't say the words "Joy, Anyway" and not think of Louie Crew Clay -- a saint of the church if ever there was one. Louie has been on my mind this week as he would have been 85 last Thursday ... and in addition to all the other things he was, he was a long-time friend of All Saints Church.

If you don't know his story, here's the Clif Notes version: Dr. Louie Crew was a gay English professor from Georgia who in 1974 found himself on a teaching assignment in San Francisco -- and made a fateful phone call to Grace Cathedral.

He asked to speak to someone who might help him and his partner Ernest connect with other gay Episcopalians. (Being from Georgia, he later noted, they were optimistic that there would

be some in San Francisco.) That request was – as he recalled it – met with “derisive laughter.”

Determined to change the church’s attitude, later that year in November 1974 Louie published the first edition of a newsletter he called Integrity, a forum for gay and lesbian Episcopalians to connect, organize, express themselves and support each other.

The newsletter rapidly grew into a national LGBTQ advocacy organization that thrived for decades. He also maintained an online repository of reflections from what he called "Anglican pilgrims" and which he entitled "Joy Anyway" -- words which came to be his signature tagline and a mantra that kept many of us going through the vortex of the worst of the Anglican Inclusion Wars.

When Louie died in 2019 with his by-then-husband Ernest by his side, our House of Deputies President Gay Jennings wrote:

“Louie changed the face of the church with his gentle spirit and fierce convictions. He loved the Episcopal Church too much to let us stay the way we were. Thanks to his resilient witness, we are more just, more faithful and look more like the kingdom of God.”

More just. More faithful. Look more like the Kingdom.
But we're not there yet. Not by a long shot.
We're still walking that tightrope between what is and what could be
Still living in the kingdom not yet come
Following in the footsteps of those who have gone before us
as a people called to have more hope than the world thinks is reasonable
striving to find "joy anyway" in the journey.

The good news this morning is that we walk that tightrope together.
Those of us who are sad,
and those of us who are happy,
and those of us somewhere in-between.

And so as we gather once again in this place of light, love, beauty and music --
whether in person or online through the marvels of technology --
we give thanks for the gift of time to hit the pause button
on the chaos, on the challenges and on the controversy in our nation and in our world to say
the prayers, to sing the songs, to hear the lessons and to light the candles this Third Sunday of
Advent.

As we do so, let's remember what theologian and mystic, Howard Thurman wrote about these
candles:

- they are candles of joy despite all sadness,
- they are candles of hope where despair keeps watch,

- they are candles of courage for fears ever present,
- they are candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
- they are candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
- they are candles of love to inspire all our living.

They are candles we light as outward and visible signs of the light we called to shine in the world — the light we claim as followers of the refugee baby born in the manger who grew up to be the Jesus ... the radical rabbi from Nazareth; the incarnation of the Christmas promise that is indeed the reason for the season:

“What has come into being in Jesus was life,
and the life was the light of all people.”

And we light them to empower ourselves and each other to go into the world as beacons of love, justice and compassion — whenever and wherever we can.

So before we run out of Advent, let us savor every last minute of this time of preparation as we gather to pause in the struggle in order to be re-energized to engage it. And to remind ourselves and each other of the power of the Christmas promise we prepare to celebrate.

*Come, O Christ and dwell among us! Hear our cries, come set us free.
Give us hope and faith and gladness. Show us what there yet can be.*

Amen.