

This morning I want to ask you to take a moment and think back to late March of this year. In a Utah courtroom a drama began to unfold that captured the nation's attention for at least 48 hours. A man named Terry Sanderson, a retired optometrist, had been in litigation with Academy Award-winning actress Gwyneth Paltrow for seven years, ever since a collision between the two of them occurred back in 2016 on the slopes of a Utah ski resort.

Now they faced each other in court. Sanderson had lowered his claim from \$3.1 million to \$300,000, and Paltrow had countersued, seeking \$1 and attorney fees. Witnesses were called. Statements were made. Both litigants took the stand. And when the dust settled, Paltrow prevailed, and the long ordeal was over. Except for what she said as she left the courtroom. Her words, unsurprisingly, became an internet meme.

According to Sanderson himself, her exact words were: "Wish you well." She had walked behind his table, paused, placed a hand on the small of his back and whispered words intended for his ears only. Sanderson says that his response to her was, "Thank you, dear." Although some critics wondered if she wasn't sticking it to him, most observers agree that the exchange was genuine. She did, indeed, wish him well. And during Advent and the Christmas season, we too wish people well. It's what we do. We send best wishes. We hope for the best as the year comes to an end.

Today, the Advent candle found on many church wreaths is not blue or purple; it is pink to symbolize joy. On this third Sunday of Advent, we celebrate joy. We also celebrate that it is Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin, *Gaudete*, meaning "rejoice." *Gaudete*, is the first word of today's epistle reading: "Rejoice."

Paul's letter goes on to urge his fellow Christians in Thessalonica to, "Pray without ceasing, to give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of

prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.” And if you are a social media enthusiast, all these phrases have internet meme potential. “Pray without ceasing.” “Give thanks.” “Test everything.” “Hold fast to what is good.”

Joy is the one thing without which Christmas cannot happen. You can take away the Christmas tree, the carols, the gifts, the lights, the mistletoe, and the tinsel. But take away joy and Christmas is impossible.

Our Christian faith is nothing if it isn’t about joy. And this third Sunday of Advent is a timely reminder of this. But the big surprise is that joy — deep, profound, smile-widening joy — is actually the astonishing gift of the Christian life when it is lived in the Spirit of Christ! The Bible continually reminds us of this.

We are blessed to be in possession of joy that is not affected by the chaos or turbulence around us. It’s like the stillness of the ocean below the surface. The waves may be high, but in the depths of one’s soul, there’s a peace and joy that “passes all understanding.”

The ancient prophet Habakkuk expresses it this way:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.

It seems as though we are never without joy! Perhaps this is because the Bible describes joy as a “fruit” that is produced on the vine of the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul puts it this way: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” But there’s more:

- In the book of Romans he declares, “Rejoice in hope.”
- In a letter attributed to St. Peter we read, “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.”
- And the Apostle John reminds us that Jesus declared, “Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”

On this third Sunday of Advent, as we celebrate joy, the good news is that joy is a quality — an attitude of heart and mind — that we never need to be without. Nor would we want to, because according to Proverbs 17, “a cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” In other words, joy is such a universally acknowledged boon to happiness and health that we don’t just wish it for ourselves but wish it for others as well. Perhaps this is best expressed in the tune we sing to wish others a merry Christmas:

We wish you a merry Christmas,
We wish you a merry Christmas,
We wish you a merry Christmas,
And a happy new year!
Good tidings we bring,
To you and all of your kin,
Good tidings for Christmas,
And a happy new year.

We wish our friends and loved ones a merry Christmas! Of course, we do! During this time of year, you might say that it is our duty, task, and privilege to wish merriment, and it's also the mission of the church as well! After all, what would the alternative be? That we *don't* wish others a merry Christmas? That we don't wish them well? That we don't hope that their lives are filled with the joy of the season?

If we take the time to reflect upon the babe born in a manger, whose name reminds us that God is always with us, who grew up to redeem all believers through his death on a cross, then we, of all God's children, are to be people who wish well for others, and who try to be the agents of that happiness in how we live out our lives!

But, alas, this image of a Christian being an arbiter, agent, and ambassador for joy and goodwill is sadly and horribly tarnished these days. Without getting into the gory details, as we think about the broader church, we're not doing too well. To many, Christians have a political agenda, and they're extremely judgmental and negative. The one thing Christians don't have, says Jane and John Doe is an agenda of love and joy.

Yes, we could point to marvelous faith-based organizations like Samaritan's Purse, the Salvation Army, Lutheran World Relief, Children's Hunger Relief Fund, and others that offer hope and happiness to millions of the marginalized around the world. Unfortunately, the attitudes and actions of one gloomy Gus, or contentious Karen, will nullify a hundred messages of good cheer and scores of harbingers of hope brought by Christians who prefer to lift up Christ rather than tear down children of God.

Advent is a time of preparation, and you might even say that it is also a time for soul-searching and reflection. Which begs the question, what sort of joy

ambassadors are we? Getting back to the well-known carol, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” you might recall that there are a few more verses to it:

Now bring us a figgy pudding;

Now bring us a figgy pudding;

Now bring us a figgy pudding

and a cup of good cheer.

Wait! What is figgy pudding, and are we sure we want to give this to our guests? Figgy pudding — also known as plum pudding or Christmas pudding — is a staple of the British Christmas table. “It resembles something like a cannonball, and it maybe feels a bit like a cannonball when it hits your stomach, but it’s tradition and we love it,” says one connoisseur speaking to NPR’s Michel Martin. Although it’s called figgy pudding, the dessert features neither figs nor plums. Nor is it pudding in the sense that we Americans think of pudding — a creamy, custardy dish. Instead, it’s a steamed cake full of raisins, currants, and brandy.

One might argue that the world is clamoring for figgy pudding. Their message similar to the Christmas carol is, “We won’t go until we get some.” They want dessert. But what they often get is a desert — a landscape that’s dry, inhospitable, and joyless. The task of the church is to offer joy, happiness, sweetness, love, all things that are typically found in a dessert!

Of course, it’s easy to do all of this when Christmas tree lights are twinkling, carols are in the air, presents are being exchanged and we’re with our loved ones. It’s not as easy when we’re outside of the family hearth and home, in the world living as agents of change ... and when it is not December, but rather the cold reality of January and a new year.

When taking a first step, or adopting a new attitude, it’s best to avoid delay. Perhaps, as we leave worship this morning, we can offer one another

encouragement by whispering the words, “Wish you well.” Maybe we can even continue to offer a similar sentiment to everyone we encounter in our day to day lives as we celebrate Jesus’ birthday and enter into a new year! After all, without joy and goodwill, Christmas can’t really be Christmas, can it? So, let’s make wishing others well the thing we do today, tomorrow, and always. It’s what we should do! And thanks be to God for that! Amen.