

Sermon *The Blue Kitten and the Pink Candle*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 3rd Sunday of Advent 12.15.24

We are in the third week of Advent. You'll notice that our Advent wreath has three blue candles, a pink candle and a white candle in the center. Let's start with the white candle – it's for Christmas Eve which is the in-between day/night between Advent and Christmas. The third Sunday of Advent has a pink candle. A long time ago, in the Roman tradition, Advent was a penitential season where believers denied themselves things they liked, they focused on their sinful nature and sought repentance and forgiveness. However, someone decided that the third Sunday of Advent should mark a break from the penitential season and instead to focus on joy. Pink is the color of joy. This is a joyful celebration day and you'll notice the hymns focus on joy and celebration to match. But what about the blue kitten.

Last week's message included the allegory of the blue kitten. Say there is a professor who is deathly afraid of public speaking. He imagines there is a blue kitten in the pocket of his sweater. He can feel it purr, he knows its there, but, no one can see the blue kitten. It's transcendent. As soon as you see it, the blue kitten disappears; yet, the effects of the kitten in his pocket result in him being able to lecture for 90 minutes without fear. This is an allegory for God and faith in God. If we could see God not only would God no longer be transcendent, we would no longer have to have faith that God exists (because you could see God). Therefore, God who is above all, before all, and will be around longer than all, is also an unseen God. Yet (and this is an important yet), the transcendent God can fit into a sweater pocket and give us courage to live into who we are meant to be. The blue kitten is a way for us to talk about the ever present and encouraging God who remains (and must remain) unseen.

Are you ready to put the blue kitten and the pink candle together? The Holy Spirit is the presence of God that is with us always. The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom and courage. God is unknowable and transcendent; the Holy Spirit is the awareness that a kitten is in your pocket. The number one attribute of the Holy Spirit is joy. The Holy Spirit is also known in unity, peace and love. But, for this pink candle Sunday, let's focus on joy from the Holy Spirit.

There is a difference between happiness and joy. The discussion groups talked a lot this year about happiness – what it is, how to get it and increase happiness in your life. Happiness is a choice. It can be measured. Happiness is derived from things that make you happy. If you do a lot of things that do not make you happy, your happiness correspondingly diminishes. This is not so with joy. Joy cannot be measured. Joy does not descend when one makes a choice for it to descend. Joy simply happens. It's a gift. Happiness is a byproduct of activity; Joy comes from the Holy Spirit. In a narrow Christian orthodox view, joy is not based on our circumstances. Joy is not what we have done for ourselves. Joy does not come from buying a new car, getting a promotion or being published (those are all happiness traits). Joy comes from what God has done for us. What has God done for us? God loves us so much that God sent Jesus, the Word Incarnate, to live and dwell among humankind. Joy is not focusing on what we have done for ourselves, joy comes from what God has done, is doing, and will do for us. Joy is manifest in love; in unity; in peace.

Think of joy this way: hold in your mind's eye someone you love deeply. When you think of that person, do you remember the day that you feel in love with them or, when you think about love, has it always seemed to be there – like a gift. For those who have given birth, when did you first love your child? Was it on the day the child was born? For many moms, they fell in love with their child before they saw their child – even while the child was still just an idea that showed up with the surprise of a positive pregnancy test. For dads: when did you fall in love with your child? Was it when you held the child for the first time? Or, was it when you felt the child move in the womb, or, did love start also with a positive pregnancy test. How about those who are aunts and uncles – when did you first love your niece or nephew? For those who are grandparents – some of you have recently become a grandparent again, and have yet to see the grandchild, but you love them just the same. For parents of adopted children, when did you fall in love with your child – the day you said yes to the adoption, the day you met your child, or do you feel like you've always loved this child who grew in your heart.

Love is joy and from the Holy Spirit. Love is why we have a pink candle burning amongst us today. Grandparenting, parenting, being an aunt or uncle is a gift. And, in a Christian sense, it is a gift from God. We feel joy because it is what God has done for us. (There will be plenty of days where you are angry or disappointed but joy comes from what God has done and not what us humans do)

Do you have a friend in whom you disagree about politics, or religion, or money? ... yet you remain friends? Unity is from joy which is from the Holy Spirit. Unity doesn't mean you agree with everything your friend thinks; unity means that despite your differences, you are friends. In fact, the more diverse we are, the more Unity (capitalized to show it is God's presence) is among us.

Jesus said that God gives peace not as the world gives and that he – Jesus – leaves God's peace with us. Have you ever been in a stressful situation and yet suddenly had a strong sense of peace within? Going back to the blue kitten allegory, peace comes from God as a gift. "As the world gives" is like working towards happiness – it can be measured, increased and decrease by our actions and behaviors. God's peace, however, is from joy and is a gift from God. There was a moment when Christi and I sat with our two daughters just after we adopted them. A silence, a hush, fell upon us and peace descended into the room. It was joyful, it was unity, it was love and peace. Sure, we worked really hard at adopting them, but what was present in that room was a gift from God. It's the pink candle burning in our presence. It is palatable joy... from a transcendent, unseen, unknowable God.

Although there is one Sunday a year where we focus on joy (I think we should burn a pink candle every Sunday; but that's me), we do read the Nicene Creed every Sunday. Let me show you where I see the blue kitten and the pink candle in the Creed. "We believe in God, maker of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen." The philosophical, eastern side of the Christian Church, wanted to focus on the blue kitten idea of God – transcendent, unseen, unknowable. With that group, we get "begotten not made; true God from true God..." Every word I believe is true and also unknowable. The western side wanted to bring in the pink candle. On that side, we have this: "For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven." Joy is from what God has done, is doing, will do for us. The Creed says: *for us*. That's joy. *For our salvation*. That's joy.

“By the power of the Holy Spirit... he was made man.” There’s the Holy Spirit again. The giver of joy, unity, love and peace. *He was made man.* Joy!

The pink candle is the present, visible side of belief in God. The pink-candle side of the Creed gives names – Virgin Mary, Pontus Pilate. Back in the year 327, when it was put together, there were bishops at the council of Nicaea, who knew people who knew people who knew people who knew people who knew people that knew Mary. Likewise, Pilate was no friend of the Jewish or soon-to-be Christian movement. There were people, like Mary, who knew people, times six, who were persecuted (or killed) by Pilate. The Creed gives names so that we are aware of the burning presence of God in our lives through our shared history.

“He ascended into heaven.” Jesus, who is for us, has ascended into the unseeable place with God; he has returned to being transcendent God. You might have a sense of Jesus around you and as soon as you look he disappears. (Like the blue kitten) But, we have not been left alone. “We believe in the Holy Spirit” ah-ha! God’s presence among us, like the pink candle. “The Giver of Life!” The One who is worshipped and glorified together – we don’t believe in three separate gods; instead we are monotheistic, this is all One God. “He has spoken through the prophets.” You heard the Holy Spirit today when we heard a reading from the prophet Zephaniah.

“We believe in one holy catholic (which means universal – the big Big Church [not just Roman Catholic]) and apostolic church. Apostolic – the bishop who ordained me was ordained a bishop by three bishops who laid their hands on him. Those three bishops were ordained in the same way. I was ordained by hands that are a part of an unbroken chain – by someone who was ordained by someone who was ordained by someone, etc. – all the way back to St. Peter who Jesus laid his hands on. The Holy Spirit, the pink candle of joy, works through our shared history from the man who ordained me back to Peter – which was not something Peter did but was a gift from God. Joy!

“We acknowledge one baptism,” for those who have had the water of baptism on their forehead, our pink candle is that our baptism is real, and present, and shows us what God has done for us.

Joy is what set the early followers of Jesus apart from others in society. It is what made the belief system of Christ Jesus attractive to others. We’re not based on happiness, we’re based on the burning pink candle that reminds us of joy – what God has done, is doing, and will do for us. So, let us rejoice and give thanks to God for the joy that has been given to us as a gift. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.