

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Brattleboro, Vermont
December 17, 2023
Third Sunday in Advent**

The Reverend Dr. Scott Couper

“Exuding Joy as Faith's Allure”

Scripture: I Thessalonians 5:16-24



My Ph.D. supervisor, Dr. Catherine Burns, always warned me: “When writing history, avoid ‘absolute’ statements. If you use absolutist qualifications, one will always prove you wrong. With absolute statements, exceptions will usually (not always) be found. Only one exception renders your declaration ‘inaccurate’. It is usually best to say ‘usually’ rather than ‘always’, ‘rarely’ rather than ‘never’, etc...”. In addition, absolutist statements render one’s claims hyperbole – exaggerated. And exaggeration disqualifies arguments so that they become unpersuasive.

There is a troubling aspect of 'hyperbole' in the scripture for this morning. The Apostle Paul writes to the congregation in Thessalonica.

Be joyful **always**

Pray **without ceasing**

Give thanks in **all circumstances**

Here, Paul was not speaking of facts and history, but he is speaking about that which is *transcendent*, that which is beyond himself or even beyond this world. Paul is not speaking of terrestrial and empirical knowledge, but rather Paul is speaking of a cosmic, a mystical, perspective. Hence, Paul uses absolutist terms and he means them.

Paul is not naïve. He is aware of life's difficult circumstances. He does not ignore them, pooh-pooh them, or diminish them. And neither should we. Real sufferings exist. Paul suffered imprisonment, mistreatment (even torture/flogging), physical ailment (gout? hemorrhoids?), homesickness, seasickness, ship-wrecked, financial insecurity, even capital punishment.

Many this time of year dread the holiday/Christmas season due to understandably 'contrasting' 'what is' with what 'should be'. The season of seeming frivolity is compared with deaths (Mary Bristol, Marion Daley, and the Vose family), dysfunctions and family feuds, divorces, depression, addiction, loneliness, separations, and all the wounds of life. Many of are ill and almost cannot experience joy due to physical discomfort. For many others, all the pain in the world (global violence/war, toxic domestic politics) is seen and juxtaposed with that which the Christmas season should be: a glimpse of the realm of God (peace/goodwill/happiness/love/friends/family). This past week, we heard in the news that three Israeli hostages were shot dead by their own soldiers (Israeli Defense Force) trying to rescue them even though they

had a white flag and had removed their shirts to show they were no threat. Are you kidding me?!

Many rightfully call for a 'Blue Christmas', a Christmas that acknowledges the pain people feel during this season. For many of us, it can be easy to tell Paul to "go stuff it". If you do not feel joy, do not admonish yourself. Instead, be silent, pray, meditate, ask something to fill you, and pray for joy to enter into you if it cannot yet emanate out from you.

If we look forward to the nativity scene, it screams of transcendence. The star says there are astrological and astronomical events at play – realities that are beyond our understanding and comprehension. The animals speak of the miracle and interconnectivity of life. Everything in the nativity scene screams of perseverance amidst hardship (donkey, manger, no room, unwed, pregnant, financially broke, Jesus as illegitimate). Even the heathen/Gentile *magi* (were not *really* present) – were there to symbolize that those who we might think cannot or do not 'get it' can actually 'get it' and experience the transcendent with us. There is no sanitizing of the scene.

I Thessalonians is the second of Paul's letters, written after Galatians (the first). Paul wrote I Thessalonians in about 49-51AD. That's twenty years before Mark's gospel! Early. Very early.

The Thessalonians were very disturbed by unexpected deaths in their congregation. They were shaken, disillusioned, depressed, wary, and wounded. Paul wrote to them to reinforce them, to support them, to uplift their spirits.

Three themes of Paul's letter are:

Joy, especially in suffering, is a mark of the Christian (1:6; 5:16);

Christians experience the realities of the new covenant (4:8–9);

Faith, hope, and love are essential traits of the Christian (1:2–3; 5:8).

I want to be honest with you, I have not suffered much in my life. I have suffered, but not much. When I have suffered, I remember that I lost perspective. I lost the sense of the transcendent, that which was beyond me that gives hope.

The gospel (Good News) of Jesus Christ is about our **oneness** with God. The lesson of resurrection is that **death is ephemeral**, or actually, the lesson of resurrection is that ‘there is no such thing as death’.

When you remove the angst of death, then the love and oneness of God transcend the terrestrial bumps and bruises of life that are real and are difficult to ignore (in fact they should not be ignored!). That is the only way Paul can advise us to “be joyful **always**” and to “give thanks in **all circumstances**”. Paul spoke in hyperbole because he pointed-out to us to that which is transcendent.

In this mystical way, the reality of the First Coming, Jesus in a manger (Emmanuel, ‘God with Us’), is the same reality of the Second Coming and the resurrection of the dead (we shall again be one with God).

The author of our church’s Advent devotional, Quinn Caldwell, stated the lesson of this message humorously: “If you’re having the suckiest Christmas ever, just remember that’s how Christmas started. It was born in defiance of all that stalks the world and tries to stuff out its light. Today, decorate something whether you feel like it or not. Let each star and bow be a sucker punch in the face of that which ails you. Let every candy cane be a raging against the dying of the light. Let every battered old ornament be the star that changes everything” (December 20, p. 91, *All I Really Want*, Abington Press, Nashville, 2014).

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the people of God.
And the people of God responded, "Amen".