

December 10, 2025

## PINK CANDLES AND THE PROMISE OF JOY



On the third Sunday of Advent, we light the pink candle on our Advent Wreath. All the other candles are purple. These purple candles harken back to a time when Advent meant four weeks of fasting and confession during which believers purified themselves in preparation for Christmas. These four weeks of Advent mirrored the five weeks of Lenten penitence leading up to Easter. Both seasons adopted purple vestments and paraments as the color to signify repentance. Our three purple candles recall this historic emphasis on Advent as a time of penitence, and amendment of life. In recent decades, Advent has adopted a gentler tone. Our paraments on the pulpit, table, and lectern as well as my vestments are now blue, not purple. The blue signifies a gradual move away from Advent's prior emphasis on sin and repentance. Nonetheless, the purple candles remind us of an earlier Advent tradition.

But what about the pink candle? Beginning in the Middle Ages, church leaders thought believers needed a break from Advent's fasting and self-flagellation. So the Third Sunday was revised to lighten the season's otherwise grim themes. This theme of joy was announced in the Latin antiphon for the third Sunday which begins "Rejoice in the Lord always!" (Philippians 4:4) Or as it was proclaimed in Latin, *Gaudete in Domino Semper*. Thus this Sunday came to be called "Gaudete" Sunday. On Gaudete Sunday the priest removed his purple vestments and instead wore rose ones to signify the shift in tone from penitence to joy. And eventually the Advent Wreath's pink candle replaced the rose one. Consequently we light a pink candle this Sunday to remind us to rejoice as we prepare to welcome the Christ Child. And we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" with its refrain, "Rejoice. Rejoice. Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel!"

There is, of course, another explanation for the pink candle that someone with an infectious sense of humor once gave me. It's pink because Mary was really expecting her child to be a girl, not a boy!

Joy is not always a quality we think of when we think of Christians. Novelist and essayist Christopher Morley once had a character say of Presbyterians and their religious piety, "It don't prevent them from committing all the sins there is, but it keeps them from getting any fun out of it" (p.17). Some observers have noted that when Christians are at their most pious they are often at their dreariest and dullest.

The words "joy" and "rejoice" are sprinkled throughout Matthew and Luke's stories of Jesus' birth. In Mary's song of praise after the angel Gabriel has visited her, she sings, "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." When Mary travels to visit Elizabeth her cousin, the child in Elizabeth's womb "leaps for joy." On Bethlehem's plain, the angels announce "news of great joy" to the shepherds.

This biblical emphasis on joy isn't limited to stories of Jesus' birth. The word joy and related words occur more than 400 times in the Good Book. The Christmas carol "Joy to the World" is a paraphrase of psalms 98:4-9 and 96:11-13. The prophet Isaiah proclaims: "Shout aloud and sing for joy." (Isaiah 12: 6) It's not an exaggeration to say that Christian faith is fundamentally about joy. Even on the night Jesus shares his last meal with his friends and goes out to be arrested, tortured, and executed, John has him speak of joy to those gathered at table with him: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (15:11) Joy often appears in conjunction with references to the night sky's stars both in scripture, carols, and art. When Magi from the East see the star stop over Bethlehem they are "overwhelmed with joy." In "O Little Town of Bethlehem" we mention how in its darkened streets "the silent stars go by."

We rejoice that a light shines in the darkness that the shadows cannot extinguish. In J.R.R. Tolkien's final volume of *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam have passed into Mordor, a land of shadows, on their long journey toward Mount Doom where they hope to destroy the One Ring of Power. They are exhausted, injured, dying of thirst, and starving. They have long exceeded the limits of their strength and are on the verge of total collapse. They lie down to sleep, uncertain whether they have the strength to continue on. Unable to rest, Sam looks up amid the bleak desolation that surrounds him and sees a star named Eärendil, the Evening Star, breaking through the clouds for only a moment. Seeing it, Sam's courage and strength are revived.

*There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach.” (LOTR 922)*

Above the gloomy clouds and exhaustion engulfing Sam and Frodo is a beauty, truth, and goodness that are greater than all that would vanquish them. That too is the promise of Bethlehem’s Child and the ground of Christian joy.

The clouds of desolation often seem to be a permanent and overpowering presence in our world. They are, however, only a passing shadow that eventually disperses. Some shadows linger longer than we would wish. Others pass quickly out of our lives. Yet above these shadows is the star of hope that shines steadily.

Regardless of whatever is going on in our lives, there is a light that is shining and fighting off the shadows. It may be small, but it burns. It may be forgotten, but it comes when we need it most. It may be nothing more than a dim flicker but sometimes even a flicker of hope is enough to gladden hearts and strengthen weary feet. It is in this small flicker of hope that we rejoice in each Christmastide. For hope, like the night sky’s stars, often shines brightest and matters the most when things feel darkest.

In his *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner writes: “Joy is home. God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness ... in the world and in ourselves can separate us from that joy.” People who know that and believe it and trust it “should come together like people who have just won the Irish Sweepstakes. It should have us throwing our arms around each other” (p. 240-241).

Blessings,  
Pastor Thomas

**SUNDAY WORSHIP** in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

### **IT IS THE JOYFUL SEASON OF GIVING**

We hope to make the holidays special for several families in need right here in East Longmeadow. When you are out shopping, please pick up a gift card, or 2, or 3. YOU decide... Walmart and Target offer the recipients a huge variety of options, but any gift card from a restaurant, the grocery store, the gas station, the pharmacy. YOU can decide! Please hang or just tuck your gift card(s) on the Giving Tree in the sanctuary in the red or green envelope we have provided. The staff at the East Longmeadow Council on Aging (The Senior Center) will then determine what and to whom the cards will be distributed to throughout the year. Your generosity will brighten the day, and perhaps lighten the load for others less fortunate and in need not just at Christmas time, but throughout the year.

We will need your gift cards on or before Sunday December 21. Thanks for always caring and sharing.

### **SPRINGFIELD RESCUE MISSION**

Once again, our caring church and community responded when presented with an opportunity to help our neighbors in need. Members of our Mission and Outreach Committee sorted through countless donations over the past 2 months, separating it all into bags of women’s, men’s, and children’s clothing, sleeping bags and blankets. After numerous trips to Springfield, our cars packed to the ceiling, we stopped counting how many bags! The Rescue Mission staff and needy members of our community were extremely grateful for your generosity. Again, we can’t say “thank you” enough!!

### **CHOIR FOR CHRISTMAS SEASON**

Choir Rehearsals are in the sanctuary on Wednesdays from 7:00 - 8:30 p.m. We welcome more singers for this Advent/Christmas season! If you can't make it tonight, please join us next week. See Deborah, Director of Music, or by email at [music@churchontherotary.org](mailto:music@churchontherotary.org).

### **KEEPING CHILDREN WARM**

What child doesn’t lose a hat or a pair of mittens **at least once** during the cold winter? Please help us fill the basket in the breezeway with new or gently used hats, gloves, mittens and scarves for the children at Kensington School to keep them warm...because we care. Neighbors helping neighbors in need, it’s what we do so well. Thank you so much!

### HOW ABOUT DOING A PUZZLE???

It's that "indoor" time of year when the nights are VERY long. In my need to keep busy, I started doing puzzles, especially in the cold winter months! I find this activity to be quite relaxing and some even say it's good for your brain, too.

Several are currently on the shelves in the breezeway. Just take one home and when you are done, put it back or pass it along so someone else can do it. Enjoy!!!

### YOUTH GROUP NEWS & PAGEANT

We are planning our next youth group meeting for Sunday December 14<sup>th</sup> from 5:00 – 6:30pm. We are planning a craft activity, making cards etc. for local shut-ins and nursing homes. If you have old Christmas cards that you can donate for us to cut up and re-use, we would appreciate them.

In the meantime, I thought I would also mention that our church is planning a Christmas pageant with the kids from our Sunday School (and adults if needed) on that same Sunday December 14<sup>th</sup>, at 10:00 am. You do not have to be a member to watch or participate. The kids from the youth group are invited if they would like to be in the short play.

We would love to see your child in the pageant if they are interested. Just send me a message to let me know.

### PRAYER

As we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your Word. Move us by your Spirit to rejoice in your wonderful works. For troubles may last for the night; but in the morning comes brightening hope and joy. Amen.



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