

Epiphany 2 Prayers, Scripture, Sermon Sunday January 16, 2022

Congregational Concerns

John Doner, Rev. Brian Sherry, Paula Welter, Tiff and family, Shirley Griffin, Cathy (Barrett)Tredenick, Don & Penny Sawyer, Russell, Jenny and family, Phyllis' cousin Harold and family, Cherie Doyon & family, Ellen's sister in N.Z., Mabel Somerville, Karl Crocker, Linda Hepburn, Elsie's niece, Randy Greer

Pastoral Prayer

God of the new year and of each new day, thank you for being with us.

You are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.

We claim that truth in times which are more uncertain than certain and more shifting than secure. Like the prophets and poets of old we cling to you as our Rock, our fortress, our strong tower. Your love for us is unshakeable and sure. Your presence is our Gibraltar keeping us from being set adrift, in a sea of troubles.

Thank you for your unshakeable, tenacious passion for humanity and for all Creation. Gracious God, we offer our prayers for others. As we think of the names listed on the prayer list we also think of their families and caregivers. Surround them with peace and an assurance that you are watching over them and keep them close to your heart. May they sense your care in our expressions of support and know that they are never all alone.

We pray for those hit hardest by the pandemic— the ill, the recovering, those who struggle with ongoing chronic conditions from Covid, hospital and health care professionals and loved ones who are grieving the death of family members and friends. May courage, hope and resilience of spirit be theirs.

We pray that those who have not yet been vaccinated will choose to be vaccinated!

We pray for courage, patience and strength for people whose medical tests, procedures and treatments are delayed because of high Covid cases.

We know that you cry with them in their distress. Grant them peace of mind, knowing that they are held secure in your grace. Be their strength where they are weak. Be their light when they feel lost that they have lost their way. Be their friend when they feel invisible. May this omicron variant come to an end sooner than later, O God so that weary bodies, minds and souls can find relief and a path to healing!

January is known as the month of the blahs. We pray God, for all mental health professionals who are overworked and stretched to the limit due to Covid. We pray for their health and well-being as they serve the needs of struggling people of every age. Grant to us the wisdom to be sensitive to the warning signs of mental distress in others around us and in ourselves.

Jesus' ministry to the poor, infirm and diseased demonstrated to the world that no one is beneath your grace or your notice. No one is beyond the reach of your tender mercies.

Your mercies are unending. Great is thy faithfulness! May we lean on your faithfulness as we seek to be faithful in our caring and sharing the good news of your love and grace for all.

Give us clarity to notice your grace, embrace it and extend it to others as we seek to follow Jesus on the Way, in these wintery January days and every day. Amen

Old Testament Isaiah 62: 1-5

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ²The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. ³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. ⁵For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Sermon: GOD'S DELIGHT

It's January, and the sun hasn't been shining all that much. Or, maybe it has, but we've all been indoors because of Covid or the cold and didn't notice it. Even without the irritating presence of a pandemic this time of year is hard on many people who live in the northern hemisphere. The lack of sunshine and inclement weather is partly to blame. Add to the atmosphere, the atmosphere of *let down* after Christmas gift-giving and gatherings. *What gatherings you may ask?* Certainly, for the past two Christmases, the pandemic restrictions exacerbated the sense of sadness and isolation that many people tend to experience this time of year.

So today, I propose that we try to bring a little balance to our blahs by indulging in a dose of *delight*. For a few moments, direct your thoughts to the *personal objects, places and people* that bring you delight.

Let's start simple with personal objects that you have in your possession. What thing do you treasure that brings you pleasure, not because of its monetary value or beauty, necessarily, but just having it or holding it makes your heart smile. Maybe it's a piece of jewelry like a wedding ring. Maybe it's something that once belonged to your parent, or grandparent. Maybe it's your new vehicle! or a tool that is *so cool!*

I have a ring that my dad wore in place of his wedding ring. He lost his wedding ring sometime, out in the field or maybe in the hay mow. After Dad died, Mom wore his gold band on a chain around her neck until she had it made smaller to fit her finger. And then, she lost it.

She hunted through the house but had no luck. She decided that she must have lost it when she went to a local orchard to pick strawberries. A long time elapsed and then one day, in January of 1990 later, as we sorted through boxes that would move to St. Thomas with me, I found a glass water pitcher wrapped in plastic grocery bag. As I lifted it out of the box, I heard a faint 'clinking sound'. Curious, I peeked inside the bag. Lying in the bottom of the water pitcher was a ring. Dad's ring! I took it out and said to Mom, 'Close your eyes and put out your hand.' And then I placed the ring in the palm of her hand. The look of surprise and sheer delight that lit up her face filled my heart with delight.

I briefly revisit that moment of delight whenever I wear Dad *and* Mom's ring.

What objects that you treasure bring you great pleasure?

Take a moment to say thanks to God, the giver of all good gifts.

Perhaps you have places that bring you delight. Maybe it is your family's favorite vacation location. Maybe it's a room inside your home or cottage where you can relax, read, play board games, or settle in for a good night's sleep.

Maybe your delightful place is the woods where you run, or the lake where you love to fish. Picture the place in your mind's eye, unless you're already there.

I enjoy visiting Niagara Falls. I try to get there at least once a year. When I drive along the QEW and see the jaw of the Niagara escarpment jutting out towards me, I feel a sense of familiar delight.

Perhaps my fondness for Niagara is due to the fact that it was the one and only place my parents ever took me for anything resembling a vacation. For my hard-working, farming parents, a vacation consisted of driving to the Falls, which back then was taking the slow 'forever' route to Niagara. We would watch the Falls falling, then spending one night in Niagara- at -the -Lake. But we didn't stay at a spiffy B&B. We stayed at the home of a family friend whose house was very clean and rather plain. The next day we headed home. Evening chores were waiting.

In recent years, my delight in Niagara Falls has been enhanced by visits to my nephew and his clan who live next door, in St. Catharines.

What places in your life bring you delight?

Give thanks to God, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth.

Last but not least, think of the people in your life whose presence or memory brings you joy and delight. Okay, maybe you're not always pleased with them or happy about what they're up to, but they're not always *your* biggest fans, either. Those moments however, do not sever the invincible, invisible cords of love.

Say their names, visualize them in your mind's eye. Persons past and present. Family familiar and dear. Friendships special and solid.

I offer no personal examples except to invite you to look into the mirror.

Who are the people that bring you delight?

Give thanks to God, in whom every family on earth finds its name.

Together we've pondered upon just a few of the personal objects, places and people which give our sagging spirits a lift and makes a smile spring to our lips.

Did you realize that is how God reacts when God thinks of you and the Creation that God for you to tend, use and enjoy?

The Bible tells us that we are the children of a creative God, who loves us and delights in us. In the Creation account in Genesis, after each day of creating something new, we are told that God declared it to be good. But, on the sixth day, after God created humanity, God said, "*This is very good!*"

That sounds to me like God was taking great pleasure in the people, that were made in God's likeness. But God took delight in all that had been created.

Did you know that the word, Eden, as in the Garden of Eden literally means "*a place of pleasure and delight?*"

That sense of Divine delight and pleasure was also exhibited on the day that Jesus was baptised in the Jordan River. Matthew, Mark and Luke are unanimous that, as Jesus came up from the baptismal waters, a voice from Heaven spoke, *“This is my Son the Beloved in whom I am well pleased!”* *Well pleased*’ is a synonym for *‘delight.’*

Too often the Bible is seen as a book that is chuck full of ‘Do’s’ and ‘Don’ts’ and tales of the bad things that happened to people when they ignored the ‘Don’ts’.

But the best part of those stories is when the forgiveness, mercy and love of God is directed to humanity in the hard times, and in spite of their wrong choices and wayward actions. The golden thread that carries through the Biblical witness and through the wider human story is that God refuses to give up on us. God loves us. And God’s love endures everything, even sin, suffering and death.

We know that God loves us because we know Jesus. We understand that God sent Jesus, not to show us how much God could love one special person but how much God deeply loves the whole world, including sinful souls like you and me.

This message of God’s love for the world preceded Jesus, as we’ve already noted in the opening lines of Genesis. But perhaps you’ve not associated the word ‘delight’ with the Old Testament and its laws and stories. One website I discovered lists over 260 references of the use of the word *delight* in our Bibles. We find it within today’s Old Testament reading as God voiced delight, pleasure, joy in the people who were transitioning from decades of living in Babylon as exiles and servants, to lives of relative freedom their homeland.

For the exiles who had been born in Babylon moving to Judea was like being exiled to a foreign land. And even for any of them who remembered what home looked and felt like, the place to which they were returning bore little resemblance to any mental images.

The great Temple of Solomon was gone. The walls of Jerusalem were smashed and scattered. Many of their people who had been left behind at the time of exile had married gentiles, and worshipped their gods. It would take many years of rebuilding to put the pieces of a proud people back together. It was a daunting task and an overwhelming burden at times to bear.

What better time, then, for God to speak through his prophet. Isaiah assured the people that they need not navigate this strange, new world alone. God’s Temple lay in ruins but God’s love for them was steadfast and unshakable.

In biblical times, a name carried a lot of meaning and power. That’s why the Jews still do not speak God’s name because it holds sacred power. You will remember some Biblical name changes that happened to signify a change in the person’s relationship with God.

Abram became *Abraham*. *Sarai* became *Sarah*. *Jacob* became *Israel*. *Simon* became Peter. *Saul* became *Paul*.

In the poem that we find in Isaiah 62, the prophet, who is speaking on God’s behalf gives the returning exiles a new name, signifying the new life, the next chapter in the nation’s story as God’s chosen people. Through Isaiah, God says, “You shall no more be termed *Forsaken*, and your land shall no more be termed *Desolate*; but you shall be called, “*My Delight is in her*” and your land will be called Married.”

The road ahead of the people proved to be difficult, but they persevered.

God’s delight and favour rested upon them as they slowly rebuilt the Temple, restored the city walls and populated the land.

As the passing of the years have proven, we have not yet reached the point where the Earth has been restored to his original beauty as Eden, that Paradise of Delight.

Life in this world always presents challenges to be met, barriers to be overcome, opportunities to be seized, successes to be celebrated and failures to be forgiven. At present we're wading through deep waters of a pandemic. Like with any flood, all kinds of yucky stuff has floated to the surface, some of it stuff we've ignored for years. We are not the first nor will we be the last generation to be confronted with natural disasters and human made catastrophes. Nevertheless, it has been a strange and difficult time in exile. Getting back to whatever the new normal will be and look like will take patience, effort and time.

What better time, than this to remember the objects, places and people that inspire us and infuse our days and moments with joy and delight.

What better time is there to be grateful to God for the gifts of life, the hope of eternal life and the special people who share our lives with us. What better time could there be for God to remind you of who you are and what you mean to your Creator, Redeemer and Friend? You, beloved, are a crown of beauty.

You, beloved, are a royal diadem that is cradled and held, in God's hands.

Your title is not *Forsaken*. Your name is God's *Delight*.

You are Beloved, with you God is well pleased.

Is it difficult to wrap your mind around the concept that God delights in you?

Think of the people who have brought moments or a lifetime of joy and happiness into your life, into your day, into your pandemic exile. Were any of them perfect people all the time? Were any of them sometimes an annoyance, sometimes a concern?

Of course. But those moments didn't rob you or them of enjoying moments of happiness, pleasure and delight. You didn't forget their value. You love and delight in them, still.

Maybe as we watch the crazy stuff going on during this pandemic it's hard for us to believe that God could find reason for or delight in many of us or in anything that's happening. But just like we found reasons for delight in precious personal objects, places and people, God finds reasons for delight, too.

God delights in the people who dare to risk their health to serve the health needs of their community neighbors. God delights in the people who got vaccinated to protect others and themselves from serious illness. God delights in children who wear their masks to school and in the seniors who patiently endure isolation inside their rooms during an outbreak. God delights in strangers who buy meals for other strangers to enjoy. God delights in faith communities that pray, support food banks, give to overseas missions, and house soup kitchens. God delights in the people and organizations that preserve forests and protect endangered species.

God delights whenever a weary or eagerly searching soul whispers, "Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief."

My friends, it is in times when life is trying to beat you down that you must stand still and look inside. Look inside and remember who you are. You are God's golden crown. You are God's diamond diadem. You are God's *Delight*.

Then after you look within, look around you. Look for the people who don't seem to know who they are; that they are gold, they are diamonds; that they too, are *God's Delight*.

Then like Jesus showed us, show them through your words of kindness, and gestures of grace, that the God who created them, loves them, and delights in them still and always, always will. Amen

