

**Sunday, December 16, 2012**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon - "Fallen Oaks."**

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The Christmas season is a time of tradition and ritual.

Celebrations are replicated year after year with as little change as possible.

We look forward, with eager anticipation, to the familiar carols, the specially prepared food, the scripture stories, decorating the tree, even the televised animated Christmas shows.

I have fond memories of watching Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman and Charlie Brown's Christmas with my sisters.

There are faded black and white snapshots of the four of us standing in front of the mantle where our stockings were hung.

When I decorate my tree, I know the story behind each and every ornament.

Joe and I recreated some of our family traditions for our own boys, taking an annual picture in front of the tree, always providing a certain type of chocolate in their stockings, baking cookies from the same recipe each year and sharing Christmas Eve dinner with aunts and uncles and cousins at Grandmas.

When we reminisce about holidays it seems that each year is exactly the same. But of course, it is not.

Every year something is different.

For my family, this year is different because Grandma is not here.

For the families in Newtown, unspeakable tragedy has found its way into their Christmas gatherings.

Change at the holidays can seem overwhelming, but we must remember that change is constant.

There was another Christmas eight years ago when our other Grandma was not there for the first time, or the Christmas Eve 27 years ago when Grandpa was suddenly not there.

As we face the challenge of creating new traditions, we could try to replicate the same meal and guest list, but it wouldn't be the same.

It will always be different.

Creating new ways to celebrate together is part of family life-as well as community life.

As we look to our holiday plans we must be cautious not to create idols out of our rituals.

We must remember that Christmas is not about the traditions – it is about acknowledging and celebrating the gift of God in our lives.

We gather to sing hymns and read stories to remind us that Jesus Christ, God incarnate, came and lived among us.

The story of the first Christmas is familiar to almost everyone in our culture regardless of faith tradition.

The baby Jesus in the manger, Mary and Joseph, his parents, the shepherds, the angels, the kings – these are all part of our remembered past.

We have been taught this story, in so many different forms – pageants, carols, movies, plays, that it is a part of our being.

The story is familiar, but perhaps too familiar, too popular.

In today's scripture reading people are flocking to John seeking baptism and redemption.

Everyone is talking about John.

Everyone wants to go and see what is going on.

When John calls them a 'brood of vipers' he is challenging their motivation.

His question to them is 'who told you to come?'

He is asking: "Is it a response to the hype – the advertising – the gossip or are you actually seeking baptism and repentance?"

We might ask ourselves, in this season of rushing about, 'who told you to go to the mall? What are you seeking?'

Today we lit the Advent Candle of Joy to remind us that this is the season of joy.

So what happens when you don't feel joyful – when the pressures of the holidays weigh you down or grief overwhelms you?

It is then that you turn – not to the manmade traditions but to the God-inspired scripture.

In our first reading today, Zephaniah encouraged us to "Rejoice and exult with all your heart. The Lord your God is in your midst."

Isaiah said, 'Shout aloud and sing for joy!'

These wise prophets are talking to us.

Our scripture messages today remind us that God's promises, God's love, can sustain us through any hardship that we might face.

Perhaps our lives are different than they were, but God's steadfast love is there – rock solid.

John the Baptist offers some suggestions for taking this season to heart—

He tells the crowd: "Share what you have, take only what you need and be satisfied."

What a great credo for this season of overindulgence.

For Christmas this year, I want us to embrace the idea that our individual actions can and will change the world.

I received the following note from Reverend Sara in Bridgeport this week in response to the help we have provided:

*Thank you so much. Your support of us in food, clothing, \$ and now blankets has done something so special to all of us here in the trenches. It has helped us believe in our mission again – and given us hope it can continue. We are proud to be your covenant mission partner. Peace, friend - Sara*

We can make a difference. This is the Christmas story.

I read an article this week that explored how the church has created a consumer culture.

The report describes the struggle of today's church leaders this way:

"Leaders are so busy surviving, offering programs or entertaining parishioners that many have lost their sense of mission to their surrounding community and to the world. And many more have disengaged from witness against structural evil all together.

It just feels like too much."

Too much what? Too much work? Too much change?

What is it that keeps us from doing God's work in the world?

Writer Scott Peck said "The whole course of human history may depend on a change of heart in one solitary and even humble individual--for it is in the solitary mind and soul of the individual that the battle between good and evil is waged and ultimately won or lost."

On Friday, in Newtown, in the battle between good and evil –evil triumphed – but that is not the end of the story.

Each one of us has the potential to be that one solitary, humble individual who changes the course of history.

It might be our own internal struggle, or it might be paying closer attention to the struggles of others – recognizing when someone is lonely or sad.

Let's take a look at our own lives and our own Christmas traditions and examine how closely they glorify God

Here is what I want for Christmas.

I want Christmas to be a season of joy for everyone.

I want people, regardless of their circumstances to be able to embrace the idea that Jesus Christ, Son of God, was born to Mary, for the sole purpose of saving us.

Emmanuel, God with us, came to be in order that we, humble human beings might be able to cope with the challenges of life, knowing that we are deeply loved by our creator.

I want Christmas to be a time when sadness and loneliness are overcome by the warmth and love of community.

For those that are incapacitated by grief, the rest of us will hold them up. We will pray for those who simply have no words right now.

I do not dismiss the fact that many people are sad or lonely at the holidays – however, I believe that we – each and every one of us – has the capacity to eradicate that sadness and loneliness by sharing God’s love.

When John the Baptist is preaching to the crowd he delivers a clear message:

“The axe is lying at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire.”

This is a call to self examination.

Are you a tree that bears good fruit?

Are you spreading God’s love every chance that you get?

Or will you be a tree that is chopped down and thrown in the fire?

This is language that seems harsh, but as I said last week, this is the beauty of John the Baptist.

We know where we stand.

We are either good strong, fruit producing trees, or we are soon to be chopped down and thrown in the fire.

John’s message is particularly meaningful in the Christmas season.

We are forced to examine our values as we make gift choices.

We are asked to consider our priorities as we make plans.

We are called to join the followers of John whose hearts grow full with expectation, waiting, anticipating the one who is to come.

The one who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and help us to change our lives.

A few weeks ago, when a storm blew through our community, a mighty oak – known as one of the twin oaks, fell.

The landscape was irreparably changed.

Some people talked of replacing the oak – but it will not be the same.

The two oaks stood tall for many years, providing a touch point for the community.

But now one is gone.

We cannot bring it back – we cannot recreate the vista.

The families in Newtown will never be the same – we know that. We accept that. We understand that the only life-giving option is to move forward.

Families will ever so slowly heal and something else will grow in place of the oak.

My friends, God's promise is steadfast, unwavering.

It has stood the test of time.

We know that the babe will be born in a manger.

The shepherds will stand in awe and the kings will come.

Through it all we will remember the words the angels spoke to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds...

Be not afraid, your prayer has been heard – nothing is too wonderful for God!