

“Removing the Cataracts”

Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Gaudete Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2025

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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I’ve entitled this message “Removing the Cataracts.”

A cataract is an eye condition, usually in older adults, where the lens in one’s eye becomes cloudy, like looking through a foggy or dusty car windshield. Things look blurry, hazy or less colorful with a cataract.

Some of you have had cataract surgery. When it goes well, it clears clouded or obstructed vision, and the difference in sight is truly amazing. When my dad had it years ago, my mom took to calling him “bright eyes” because the difference in his vision was so dramatic.

What are our spiritual cataracts that, if removed, might help us see the joy of Christ’s coming more clearly? How is obscured spiritual vision—in our lives or looking at others’ lives—keeping us from Christmas joy? What would it take for someone to call us “bright eyes” on this Gaudete Sunday?

The third Sunday of Advent is a bit different from all the rest. In the midst of more penitential and reflective scriptures and themes, joy breaks through! The pink candle is a visual reminder of joy. The word “Gaudete” is the Latin imperative that means “rejoice!”

Maybe we’re feeling joyful today. Maybe we’re not. Maybe we’re more like the cartoon character “Cathy.” The comic strip “Cathy” ran from 1978 to 2010 and chronicled the challenges of a young, single professional woman. In one episode that ran this time of year, Cathy says to her boss: *“My left brain is making lists of people I haven’t sent cards to yet. My right brain is at the craft store, thinking up creative gifts I could make before Christmas.”*

“My nerves are at the mall, worrying whether I should have gotten that other necktie for Dad. My stomach is still at last night’s party, begging for more Christmas cookies. My heart is stuck in traffic somewhere between my mother’s house, my boyfriend’s house, and the adorable man I saw at the post office.”

Her boss asks: *"What is it you want, Cathy?"*

Cathy replies, *"May what's left of me sneak home early and take a nap?"*

Maybe instead of feeling joyful we're feeling frazzled, anxious, even depressed, or in need of a nap.

And maybe, like John the Baptist, we're worried about the state of our world. *"Is this really the Messiah?"* John wonders in today's Gospel. John had the right expectation—the Lord is coming—but a clouded vision of judgment and doom. John's question goes something like *"If this is the Messiah, where is the message of repentance?"* Our question goes something like: *"If Jesus is the Messiah, and this is the messianic age, where is hope and peace for all?"*

The answer for John and for us is disarmingly simple. Two chapters earlier, the gospel writer Luke tells us about the birth of John the Baptist. John's father, Zechariah, said the two hallmarks of the Messiah would be forgiveness of sins and light to those in darkness. (Luke 1:77-79)

Forgiveness and light. Are these not the messages we need to hear on Gaudete Sunday? Forgiveness and light. Are these not the messages we need to hear 11 days before Christmas? Forgiveness and light. Are these not the antidote to our clouded vision?

Jesus' response to John embodies Zechariah's prophecy of forgiveness and light. He responds, *"Go tell what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."*

What would it mean to us to live out forgiveness and light? It means removing the cataracts of condemnation and control. Forgiveness and light means seeing the Kingdom where it **IS** breaking in, rather than lamenting the places where it is not. It is easy to find high profile tragedies and other bad news. On this 13th anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School murders, where 20 children and 6 teachers and administrators were gunned down with a military assault weapon, it is tempting to conclude: *"There is no God."* It is more challenging to see where divine genius and human effort conspire to bring healing and hope.

This is the continuing journey of Carol and my friends, Becky and Bob Virgalla, who many of you have met in their periodic visits to worship here. Some of our men met Bob at the Men's Fellowship Breakfast in Naugatuck in October. Becky was an administrator at Sandy Hook. The day of the shooting, as she and two other administrators rushed toward the gunfire, the one ahead of her turned and said "Shooter! Go back!" That administrator and the principal of the school were killed; Becky was not and has wrestled with being a survivor, including a bout of breast cancer that her doctor said was "absolutely caused" from the stress of that day. Yet Becky and Bob have continued in faithfulness to Christ and His Church, not blaming God for the evil that humans are responsible for.

Embracing forgiveness and light means removing the cataracts of spiritual cloudiness that mute our rejoicing in the rich joy of God in Jesus Christ. Embracing forgiveness and light means going beyond what is comfortable to be in places where folks are disadvantaged in some way. It means serving them: not as "those" people, but as spiritual siblings.

And it means working to make a difference where darkness and evil appear to have sway. For many years, now, Carol and I, along with Becky and Bob, have walked or ran for the Vicki Soto Foundation, created in memory of then-26-year-old Victoria Leigh Soto, one of the teachers killed at Sandy Hook. While the work of the Foundation can never restore Vicki to her classroom, her students or her family, it is also amazing to see the goodness done by the Foundation and those that support it. Since adequate funds became available in 2014, The Vicki Soto Memorial Scholarship has provided a prestigious four-year renewable award totaling \$12,000 to 40 young people pursuing a career in education. Each year, the scholarship committee selects four outstanding recipients who exemplify academic excellence, leadership, and a deep passion for education. Out of their pain, the Soto family and the Foundation have embodied the creed that *"it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."*

Closer to Woodbury, some of you had the chance to read this week's *"Living Through Grace,"* and saw Cathy Riefenhauser's article on the reactivation of our Member Care team. Seven leaders got together this past Monday to determine how we care for one another more consistently;

and how we invite others—some of you!—to be a team of people ready to serve if called upon to do so. It is, in fact, the mirror image of our *“Helping Hands”* ministry, which is focused outward and beyond our congregation. Member Care is inward facing, incarnating St. Paul’s exhortation in Galatians 6:2: *“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”*

We don’t always need a team of helpers, of course. Some embracing of forgiveness and light we can do for ourselves. We know those things that we need to change, and whether or not we need human help in changing them. For some of them, we will.

But whatever needs to change....whatever is needed to clear up our vision....whatever needs to happen in our lives to release joy, needs Jesus Christ. That’s why we celebrate the birth of a Savior. If we could do it wholly on our own, we would. And we wouldn’t need a savior.

And this need for Christ, which we sometimes call “having faith in Christ,” really means that there are some things we must trust to Jesus. We must trust that there will be some things that, in the long view, will never make sense in this life and will only become clear in another light and along another shore. For there is much that is mystery in our lives. And isn’t Christmas, in some larger sense, a mystery: that the Lord of heaven and earth should be born in the vulnerability of a baby and in the unpretentious home for farm animals. The joy of Christmas comes when we trust that the mysteries of our lives will become as clear to us as the mystery of God being born in a tiny little baby.

The Rev. Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian minister, tells a story of mystery that leads to joy in his 1989 book *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*. It is the story of John Pierpont. It is a great story and I wish I could tell it with the ending Fulghum gives it. It is a wonderful story of overcoming adversity and having one’s life count despite all the obstacles, a “rags to riches” story if you will.

Imagine then how disappointed I was to learn, after some research, that Rev. Fulghum confused the story of the Rev. John Pierpont with that of his second son, James Pierpont! Apparently Fulghum’s error escaped the notice of his editors. If you’d like to read his erroneous narrative I can get you a copy. It’s wonderfully inspiring and patently false!

And yet the true story is interesting in it's own right, a curious narrative of the similarities and differences of a father and son or, by extension, of any parent and their child. The Rev. John Pierpont was a Unitarian pastor and staunch abolitionist; his son James Pierpont was a Unitarian organist and fought for the Confederacy. John Pierpont failed as a dry goods merchant; so did his son, James. Both, because of their business failures, left their wives and children in the care of others for extended periods. James' first wife died at age 34 but he eventually was remarried to the daughter of the mayor of Savannah. Both father and son, John and James, became noteworthy in their lifetimes for their writing of poetry and songs. In short, like many of us, there were "ups" and "downs" in both their lives. And my guess....well, let me see a show of hands: how many of you have ever heard of either of them?

So why am I telling you this? It's not an uncommon story, as I've said, for the 19th century or the 21st century. Failures and successes, good and bad, children who disappoint parents and parents who disappoint children.

I'm telling you this story because it is a story about joy, about the long view, and about the mystery of how God uses our lives for good at the very time when we are feeling the worst or doing the worst.

For you see, every year about this time we celebrate James Pierpont—the son, the failed merchant, the widower, the soldier of the Confederacy—and his success. We carry in our hearts and minds his memory in the form of a song. A song that stands for the simplest joy, a song three or four hundred million people around the world know—a song about something most of us have never done but can imagine—a song that every one of us, large and small, can hoot out the moment the chord is struck on the piano and the chord of our spirits resonates. In doing so, despite all the complexities and contradictions of his life, James Pierpont left behind a permanent gift for Christmas—the best kind—not the one under the tree, but the invisible, invincible one of joy:

*"Dashing through the snow, in a one-horse open sleigh
O'er the fields we go, laughing all the way.
Bells on bobbed tails ring, making spirits bright
What fun it is to ride and sing a sleighing song tonight.*

*Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way,
Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh.*

*Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way,
Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh.*