

Advent III - JOY



You Will Need:

Computer / Way to watch YouTube

A way to make a list (tablet, paper, pen, etc)

JOY

How do you define joy?

In the Christian tradition, joy is more than happiness. Joy comes from knowing that we are loved by God, that we are forgiven, and invited to live this life in freedom. Joy can be present even in dark and difficult times. For instance, we may experience joy when we remember a story about someone we love, even when we are grieving their loss. We experience joy in being loved and in loving others. There are many reasons we know joy.

Together, make a list of that which gives you joy. Take some time so that your list is as long as possible. Feel free to add to it as you work through this curriculum.



Watch this 3 minute video of a monarch swarm recorded by a drone hummingbird.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWOySU_hAz0

- How did you feel when you watched the video?
- What questions did it raise for you?
- How might the sight of monarch swarm be an expression of joy?

What is incredible about the butterflies in this swarm is that every single monarch is unique. There are no two monarchs that have the same wing pattern. This is the wonder and diversity of the creation and is also true of the stripes of the zebras, tigers, and the fingerprints of human beings. The fact that no two humans have the same fingerprint of the roughly 7.75 billion people on this earth, is incredible. There has never been and will never be another person with the same fingerprint as you, which is why the federal government uses fingerprinting. It is like an identifying badge we carry all the time! This points to the remarkable diversity of creation as well as the uniqueness of each individual. Every single monarch is a being unto itself. It may only live for a few months but no monarch exactly like it will ever exist again.

How does this affect your thinking about each creature in the world?



Look closely at this picture. Can you find any differences in these two monarchs? Like fingerprints the differences are subtle.

Light the third (pink) Advent candle, the candle representing JOY.

Read Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.”

God created humanity in God’s own image,
in the divine image God created them,
male and female God created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.”

Diversity & Making Room for All People

As you know, this text is part of a larger narrative about the creation of the world. Each act of creation is set within a day. On day one, God created light and dark and called it good. On day two, God created the sky separating the waters above the earth from the waters below the earth (a fun glimpse into ancient understanding of rain and the make up of the earth) and called it good....and so on.



Interestingly, the diversity of the created order is inherent in the very first chapter of the Bible. Remember that Genesis begins:

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, **2** the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. **3** Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. **4** And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light Day, and the darkness they called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

A pastor friend of mine, Slat's Toole, who identifies as nonbinary, has pointed out that there is a spectrum between light and dark. At a minimum, we experience dawn, high noon, dusk and midnight. The words “Day” and “Night” represent the whole spectrum of experience that moves from light to dark. The text is not intended to represent light and dark or day and night as binary or two opposing poles.

The same goes for the animals that were created. The word “animal” is used to represent all the animals in all their diversity of species. Same is true for livestock, fish, birds, and everything that creeps upon the earth. These are representative, not an exact description.

- Why do you think this is important to understand when reading this text?
- How has this text been used to hurt transgender and nonbinary people?
- How does opening up the binary of male and female like we did for light and dark make room?
- How then, can this text be healing rather than one that excludes and pushes out certain individuals or groups of people?

The panels pictured above by Pat Wittliff were commissioned by West Plano Presbyterian Church. Check out Day Two – the creation of the sky. If you ever need an argument as to why this story was and is not intended as a factual account of creation, reflect upon the idea that the sky is a dome that separates the waters from each other.....Not exactly scientifically sound....

Monarch Fun Facts

Speaking of male and female, there is a way to identify the gender of a monarch. The female has thicker black lines on its wings. The males have thinner black lines and little black dots near the base of its wings. Look at these two monarchs. Which is which?



Word Study – Image of God, Master, Dominion, & Take Charge

Our society, culture, and way of being has been shaped by the Christian tradition whether we realize it or not. Our relationship to the earth has been influenced by our understanding of Genesis 1:26-28.

How do you think this is true?

How would our relationship to the earth be shaped by a narrative that tells us we should master and take charge of the fish, birds, and everything crawling on the ground?

Unfortunately, a power hungry and selfish understanding of this text has shaped our relationship to the earth. It has “given us permission” to abuse, overuse, misuse, pollute, and bring death upon creation.

It is, therefore, essential that we claim and reclaim an understanding of this text more in line with the original intention. This text was not intended to make space for abuse of the earth. It functioned to remind humans that God created the world and it is, therefore, God’s world, not ours. It also highlighted the importance of the sabbath (remember that God rested on the 7th day) and laid out our unique place in the world. In order to understand it and reclaim a healthy understanding of this text, we need to look at it carefully.

Image of God

- How were humans created?
- What makes us unique among the created beings?
- What do you think it means to be created in the image of God? Does it mean we look like God or God looks like us?

Each person is created in the image of God, meaning something of God is contained within them. This is why diversity is so important and something we must celebrate. Why is the diversity of the human being and expression essential to our understanding of God? What does it teach us about God?

Master

- Upon first reading, what do you think it means to fill the earth and “master” it?
- What does it mean to be someone’s master?
- How has this understanding of “master” shaped our relationship to the earth?

Now, consider what it means to master a craft or artform such as Karate or dance.

- What does it require of you to master Karate?
- What is your relationship with Karate if you are seeking to master it?
- How does this understanding of “master” shape our relationship to the earth?

Dominion & Take Charge

Now, consider what it means to have “dominion” (a common Biblical translation of this text) or to “take charge.”

- Who are some of the people who are asked to “take charge” in your life, in your community, and in our country?
- What qualities do we expect (or at least hope for) in someone who is asked to take charge?
- What do we assume about their intentions?
- If a person has dominion of an area, what does that person hope will happen to it? Do they want it to thrive or fail?
- How must a person care for something of which they have dominion if they want it to thrive?

With these understandings of what it means to take charge or have dominion, how are we to relate to the earth? What qualities should we possess if we are going to take charge of the world? How should we treat the earth?

Why This Matters & We Should Care

The importance of careful Biblical study cannot be understated. We tend to behave based on the beliefs we carry, whether those beliefs are well thought through or not. While careful reading of the Bible is not easy and takes time and study, the rewards are great. Such reflection has the potential to change us and our behavior. Just think how different our world would be if we believed that to master and take charge of the world meant to learn about it, study it, seek to understand it, respect it, and treat it as something we want to thrive for its own sake. Imagine how different the decisions made at the highest levels of government if we understood ourselves to be caretakers with a unique and special responsibility for the wildly diverse creation that every day teaches us about who God is and who we are in the world.

Because our culture has been shaped by the Christian church, it is our responsibility to correct past mistakes and understandings of our theology. If we change our hearts and our beliefs, we might just change the way we treat each other, ourselves (remember your own uniqueness), the remarkable monarch, and the world.



Advent Week III Project— Storytelling

The Bible is a series of stories. It is the story of God’s people and the way God has interacted with them. We often see ourselves in the stories. We are like the Israelites who wander in the wilderness complaining even though they are told to trust God and over and over God comes through. We are like the disciples that, well, make many mistakes. They even denied knowing Jesus to save themselves!

One of the best ways to get to know each other, even those you know well, is to tell a story. In stories we learn what matters to another and we learn how they see the world. We learn what they care about and what makes them unique.

This week, you are invited to tell a story of joy, wonder, and awe. When have you felt wonder and joy? When have you been amazed by something around you - maybe an event, maybe something in nature, maybe someone’s kindness, or maybe something created by another human being? Tell your family a story!

The First Monarch

Here is my story of wonder, awe, and joy:

I have cultivated a milkweed and pollinator garden for four or five years. Time has warped since the pandemic so I am not quite sure anymore how long I have done anything.... East coast milkweed grows quite tall. Some stalks match my 5 foot stature and most need to be staked in order to protect them from falling over. The milkweed in my garden is lovely for a short time and then it looks rather gangly, or whimsical, I like to tell it. (I believe one should speak kindly to all living beings whenever possible.)

I am passionate about the environment. I love the natural world and have always adored its creatures. My love has also led to deep concern and at times near despondency. Like so many others and probably most of you, I am deeply concerned about the damage we have done to this beautiful blue marble we call home. When my daughter was born five years ago, my concern grew fierce. As a family we have sought to change and adapt our lifestyle to reflect our love and concern. We continue to fail daily, but we are trying.

This past summer, I met with a sales representative from a solar panel company. We met masked in my dining room which offers a fantastic view of my wild and whimsical pollinator garden. The sales rep and I were going over finances of a possible install on our roof. He was doing a lot of math. I am not math minded so it was all confusing and a bit over my head. All of a sudden I saw a flicker of movement and color out of the corner of my eye. I jumped up mid-sentence and ran to the window. There perched on a milkweed was a lovely monarch. "Oh, they are here!" I exclaimed. I must have startled the sales rep because he ran to the window to join me. "What?!" he asked me. "The monarch. It is the first one I have seen," I said smiling. "Oh," he said a bit confused. It was late in the summer and I had not yet seen a monarch. In the years before, our milkweed had hosted 30 to 40 caterpillars. This summer I did not see even one. That does not mean they were not there, but I could not find the yellow, black, and white cuties on my milkweed. I was growing increasingly discouraged and depressed, so the sight of this one monarch brought hope. It also reminded me of their delicate beauty. The monarch fluttered in and out of view landing on one milkweed after another. "Lay some eggs!" I kept repeating. Now, the monarch may have been a male, but nonetheless, I felt it needed some encouragement.

The sales rep confessed to knowing almost nothing about the monarch. I explained the importance of milkweed, their amazing migratory path, and their dwindling numbers. I then explained why this one monarch was so important to me and how it had renewed my hope and lifted my spirits. We stood at the dining room window for a good long time watching the monarch with my daughter who had joined us upon hearing my excitement. My daughter was as overjoyed as I was to see the beautiful creature. She wanted to run outside and greet it but I wanted the moment to last, knowing that her exuberance would scare it off. So we forgot all about solar panels for a bit and watched one, just one of the billions of monarchs that make their way up the east coast and then back down to Mexico each year, flutter around our side yard. I was filled with wonder and my heart was overjoyed that this particular monarch had found its way to my small patch of lovingly tended milkweed.

There would be many others, but that first monarch was my favorite. Such a tiny creature to hold so much hope, joy, and truth about our relationship to God's creation.

Resources:

Curriculum by Rev. Kelly Wiant

To see all seven days of creation by Pat Wittliff visit: http://westplanopresbyterian.org/creation_panels.html