

An Anniversary Sermon
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 Muhlenberg Lutheran Church

Rejoice in the Lord Always!

Today, December 16th is the popular Mexican celebration Las Posadas. “Posadas” refers to the “lodgings” that Mary and Joseph sought in Bethlehem. Their search is reenacted in neighborhoods, unsuccessfully, until finally they are welcomed in, and the party begins!

Yes, today, December 16th is a great day for a party! We can whoop it up too, because today we celebrate our 170th Anniversary! Happy Anniversary, Muhlenberg! Yes, our cornerstone is dated 1849, the year in which we were officially incorporated, the year in which the Virginia Synod received us as a congregation. But the great discovery of the 150th Anniversary Committee was an item found in our 1888 cornerstone from the old brick church. It made mention of a small group of Lutherans who gathered in Harrisonburg on December 17, 1848, to formally sign a document requesting the formation of a congregation under the leadership of Pastor John J. Suman of Maryland. That’s all we need to know to throw a party! Happy 170th Anniversary, Muhlenberg!

The history of our congregation is fascinating and reveals the difficulties of sustaining a community of faith. Our first two buildings, a white frame church and later a brick structure, were located on the corner of North Main and Wolfe Street. The ground was broken on our present church in 1949, one hundred years after our founding. This stately stone structure was built by the company of member Joseph Nielsen with loans secured by twenty-five families of our congregation. The cornerstone was laid in 1950 and the church dedicated in 1952. Each All Saints’ Sunday white crosses with the names of our many pastors are placed around the nave, a beautiful tribute to their sacrifice on behalf of the faithful.

Until 1941 pastors stayed for a brief period of time—from two to four years—as the congregation sought to gain its footing. You may not know that the Virginia Synod played a central role in keeping our congregation financially viable for our first seventy years! Our forebears needed the support of the other congregations of our Synod. Even today the Virginia Synod gives us a large grant to fund our campus ministry and played a major role in the calling of Pastor Lauren. So as we celebrate our anniversary, it is well for us to remember that we are not independent, but connected to a network of caring and outreach that extends from Virginia to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and beyond to the world.

To help us celebrate this day, I have written a new hymn. The last verse is a prayer for God’s continuing presence through the Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit, live in us through faith by grace alone:
 Unite our wills to serve in love that all may be your own.
 Then let our voices join the hymn that streams through endless space:
 “O God, the wellspring of all love, we sing your wondrous grace!”

This is my Advent/Christmas gift to you as I mark these last days of ministry as your interim pastor. I have become very comfortable in ministry here at Muhlenberg and will definitely miss our partnership in the gospel. BUT on December 30th after worship, my co-conspirator Mark and I will get on our camels hitched out back and ride away into the Valley. We’ll be searching for those other wise guys from the East who are following a star to find the newborn king. Wouldn’t you know it! After the early service Bob Runion told me he knows someone who has two camels!

At the end of my tenure and on this Anniversary Sunday, I want to publicly thank persons whom I have worked with and who have played an essential role in our worship life. I'm treading on dangerous ground here: so many have play a vital role in the life and ministry of Muhlenberg, but today I do want to acknowledge a few, without whom our worship life would be less beautiful and vibrant.

Linda Depoy, our parish administrator, edits the bulletin and the *Chimes* every week and is unquestionably the person who makes everything click around here. She is our congregational memory. Linda, and our Thursday crew who collate worship materials each week, are dedicated servants of God!

Elizabeth just celebrated 10 years as our Director of Music. She is such a gift to our congregation as she integrates music and musicians into the liturgy. It has been wonderful to watch her organize and lead our music, and I have so much appreciated our partnership in planning each service.

Kathy Thompson has the unenviable task of securing worship assistants each week, up to 31 of them! You should send her on a trip to the Bahamas! Kathy is so upbeat about her ministry on behalf of Muhlenberg! Kathy and Mary Elizabeth, who schedules the LAMS, and those who organize ushers and greeters are gifts of God to our worship life! And while we're at it, thank you to the Hills, Waltons, Whitmires, Bakers, and Looneys for washing communion glasses after our services.

You wouldn't hear worship leaders clearly without the commitment of Mike Koch, our chief sound person, who has served in this role for 10 years. Mike has scheduled members to be at the soundboard every Sunday and has looked after and repaired the equipment. We thank Mike for his invaluable ministry!

We can't overlook the flowers, can we? It's a good time to remember to sign up for a Christmas poinsettia! Let's flood the chancel with poinsettias this year! Thank you, Louise Layman, for your love and care in beautifying the Lord's sanctuary week after week.

And thanks to Paula Caldwell and our communion ministers who take the Sacrament of the Altar to our shut-ins as they bring God's grace and our love to those who cannot join us on Sunday morning.

Finally, what can I say about David Hill, our sacristan and altar guild all wrapped into one? He has undertaken this ministry for over 37 years because of his deep love for God's house and his reverence for the sacred things of God. In David and Peggy you have a treasure to be embraced and loved. Also assisting David in this ministry has been the incomparable Diane Walton.

As a professor of sacred music at Lenoir-Rhyne I always took the opportunity when visiting a church to thank its musicians. They give of their time and talents week after week to make our worship joyful. So on behalf of the congregation, thank you to all of our singers, instrumentalists, conductors and their significant others who share them with us, so that God's name might be praised!

Our joy spills over today as we celebrate our history, and as we thank these children of God who lead us in worship. Our lessons express that sentiment of joy and thanksgiving.

From the prophet Zephaniah we heard: "The LORD, your God, is in your midst...he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing!"

From the song of Isaiah that served as our psalm: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this know in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy."

From St. Paul's letter of joy to the church at Philippi, a congregation that loved the good news Paul preached and wrapped their arms around this apostle: "Rejoice in the LORD always; again I will say, Rejoice."

Given these words of joy, the message of John the Baptist seems incongruent. What kind of words are these on a great day of celebration? "You brood of vipers!" "You snakes" the Baptizer says to the crowds! "Bear fruits worthy of repentance! Turn from your evil ways to embrace the new age that is coming."

As we reconnect with our history this morning, the Baptizer negates that claim to heritage: "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" In other words, "don't boast about your history, your forebears, as if that makes you more acceptable to God." We can't "ride the coattails" of our ancestors. They lived out their baptism and bequeathed to us great blessing, the "fruits of their repentance." Now it is our time to turn from sin and greet the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Now it is our time to bear fruit. Now it is our time to emulate the Baptizer. John did not feel worthy enough even to untie the laces of Jesus' dirty sandals. I also love the Baptizer's assessment in the Gospel of John: "My joy is now complete. He must increase, I must decrease."

The good news John proclaimed is that Jesus comes to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. It is the Spirit who inspires us to bear the fruit of *mercy*—sharing our coats with the homeless. It is the Spirit of Christ who makes us *generous* with our resources. That same Spirit helps us live out our faith with *integrity* in an authentic lifestyle that reflects Christ. We rejoice because the Spirit of Christ sets us on fire with deeds of mercy, generosity, and justice.

As the Spirit fills us with the power of God, we testify on this Anniversary Sunday that Muhlenberg is not our church; it is not your church or my church; it is not even the church of our forebears. Muhlenberg is and always has been the Lord's church, and we are the Lord's people, set apart like John to point to Jesus as the coming Messiah, to love him as our Savior, to serve him with our lives.

Happy Anniversary, Muhlenberg!

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting. Amen