

**EMPOWERED BY JOY**  
**Luke 1:46-55**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, December 14, 2014**

On the third Sunday in Advent we light the candle of joy in anticipation of the joyful news that Christ is born. At this time of year as we get closer to December the 25<sup>th</sup> as we greet each other with “Merry Christmas” aren’t we unintentionally putting on each other the expectation to be merry or at least happy in keeping with the spirit of the season. But that’s not always the case is it? The coming of the Christmas season doesn’t guarantee happiness, in fact for some, Christmas often triggers feelings of unhappiness, even despair, because we just can’t turn emotions on and off as easily as you can with a light switch.

That’s why the Christmas season and all its trimmings presents us the opportunity to draw the distinction between being merry or happy and being joyful. There is a difference you know.

Happiness comes when everything’s going your way and you have everything you want, which explains why none of us are completely happy all the time. Joy, on the other hand, is knowing that even if everything is going against you and you don’t even have everything you need, God is with us to bless us with comfort and strength to endure even the hardest times. The people I know who still experience joy despite their setbacks and missed opportunities have come to trust God is still in control and because of his faithfulness, sooner or later all things will work together for good. Maybe now they’re experiencing the pain of crucifixion, but in God’s time they will know the promise of resurrection. As the psalmist put it, “Yea though I walk through the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff comfort me...” (Psalm 23)

These are the same people Jesus talked about when he said,

“Blessed are the poor  
for yours is the Kingdom of God.  
Blessed are the hungry  
for you shall be filled.  
Blessed are you who weep now  
For you will laugh. (Luke 6:20-21)

Keep in mind Jesus said these things to people who were desperately poor, actually fighting off hunger pains and grieving for the life that should have been. You’d think they would have shouted out to Jesus, “Is that all you got?” and then stomp away yet odd as it may seem, they stayed, they listened and accepted his teachings as truth. Somehow they knew when God’s all you got, God’s all you need.

The world Jesus was born into was far from being a happy place. There may have been Pax Romana, Roman peace, which provided order, stability and for some prosperity but for the vast majority of people life was hard and despair constant. This was especially true in Judea because the Jews couldn't understand why God wasn't liberating them from the hard life imposed on them by the Romans who bled the land dry with heavy taxes and ruled with an iron fist. As far as they were concerned the Roman Peace was a cruel joke and God was an absentee protector and savior. No wonder the Jews cried out, "Where are you? When are you coming? How long, O Lord, how long must we wait?"

As you already know, the Jews were expecting the Messiah to make a high grand entrance into Jerusalem, a second King David, soldier and statesman of the highest order who'd return Israel to its former glory and lift their standard of living. Instead God chose to silently begin the process of their salvation in an insignificant town way out in the sticks.

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you'." Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you shall conceive and bear a son and you shall name him Jesus. (Luke 1:26-31)

Much has been said about how dangerous it could be for a single woman to become pregnant in those days which could have been the motivating factor for Mary's question, "How could that be, for I am still a virgin?"

Who'd believe she was faithful to Joseph, especially if Joseph denied being the father? And what would he do when he found out? At best Mary would be shamed and shunned by the community, at worst she'd be stoned to death. Even so, despite her scary predicament, Mary was joyful, she trusted that God was in the mix that her life was in her hands. That's why she answered, "Here I am, a servant of the Lord, let it be according to your word."

But Mary's experience of joy was just beginning. Soon afterward she visited her cousin Elizabeth who was also expecting. Luke reports right after Mary met Elizabeth at her house, the child in her womb, (who grew up to be John the Baptist) leapt for joy and being filled with the Holy Spirit she said to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Both Mary and Elizabeth shared a second burst of the Spirit's presence and were overcome with the joy that can only come from above.

As we hear or remember this story let's not forget these two women weren't just one dimensional stained glass images. Like us they had moments of unhappiness, doubt and fear but also like us they could claim the blessed assurance they weren't forgotten and alone

because God was with them. What's more their experience of was sustained by their willingness to submit and obey their thirst for God, the source of all our blessings and life itself.

How else can you explain Mary's song?

"My soul magnifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in  
God my savior  
for he has looked with favor  
on the lowliness of his servant.  
(Luke 1:46-48)

You might be thinking, that's great for Mary, why wouldn't she be joyful. She was singled out to be the chosen one who'd bear the Son of God. It's true only Mary carried Christ in her womb, but all of us carry Christ in our hearts. Unless you intentionally and thoroughly reject him, even when you take him for granted and forget to keep your promise, Christ will keep his promise and stay with us, always.

So the joy that comes from the blessed assurance of God's love through Christ is a blessing given to everyone, even ordinary people like us so we can experience and do extraordinary important things that will impact the quality of life of the people we love and serve in our quest to be Christ-like.

Yet what makes our joy complete is knowing in your heart Christ was born to fill your world with justice and peace. Listen to the rest of Mary's song:

"His mercy is for those who fear him  
(who are in awe of him)  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm  
he has scattered the proud.  
He has brought down the powerful  
and lifted the lowly.  
He has helped his servant Israel  
according to the promise he  
made our ancestors  
to Abraham and his descendants  
forever. (Luke 1:49-56)

The Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of God's plan from the beginning to bring justice and peace to the world and as Christians we believe the story continues through Jesus. That's why, in Advent, we look forward, not just to Christmas Day, but to Jesus, who was so dedicated to sacrifice and service that it could only end in his suffering and death on a cross.

Our understanding of Jesus will always be terribly skewed if we delete the mystery of Christ's passion while celebrating the mystery of his birth. That's why in some strange

roundabout way when we combine our celebrations of his birth with the victory of his death, real joy is possible. At the same time following Mary's example of her unqualified and unconditional, "Yes" to God, in spite of any risk or cost to ourselves, draws us closer to where the true joy of Christmas is to be found.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a woman who dedicated her life to Christ, gave practical advice to all who wish to experience the joy of Christmas:

Be loving as he loves.