

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • DECEMBER 16, 2018
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Advent Litany

From Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is our salvation;

we will trust, and not be afraid.

For the LORD GOD is our strength and might;

you have become our salvation.

With joy draw water from the wells of salvation;

giving thanks we will call upon your name.

Make known God's deeds among the nations;

we will proclaim your name as exalted.

Sing praises for the Lord has done gloriously;

we will let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion;

for great in our midst is the Holy One of Israel.

The Scripture

Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

The Message

Joy Preserved

Nick Larson

Waiting is not a skill that comes naturally, and so the impulse to ignore Advent is a strong one. By this point in the month of December, it is almost irresistible. Many have already opened the floodgates, broken into the full-blown birth of Jesus. If you look closely enough around here, you can find we, too, struggle with this temptation. Yet, I want to encourage you to consider deeply this intimate narrative about the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. The scale of this story hardly seems grand enough to spend an

entire Sunday on in Advent, one of the most well-attended portions of the church year. But it may be just what we need.

Many of us come to worship on this day battered by the gauntlet we politely call “the holidays.” The stress of balancing work and home expands beyond the already normally dangerous levels of contemporary life, as families aim for that holiday ideal. Those who grieve or question or doubt find little platform or patience for their concerns. Many families feel envious of those other families, whose Christmas cards make life look more prosperous, or more harmonious, or just plainly more beautiful. Emotions can be raw and cultural nostalgia crowds out gospel truth, as people look backward, rather than at the story of Christ, for inspiration.

To our lonely and fragmented souls, Luke offers a wonderful pre-Christmas gift, a small story about a genuine connection between two pregnant women of different generations. In this text, we see God at work in a deeply personal way that also just happens to change the world! The work of the Holy Spirit is made manifest as the baby in Elizabeth’s belly (John) responds to Mary’s greeting. As well-timed baby kicks often do, this one opens the recipient to a new awareness and understanding of unfolding events.

I have been reading a book called *God over Good; Saving Your Faith by Losing Your Expectations of God* by Rev. Luke Norsworthy. In it he spends time exploring the age old saying, “Expectations are nothing more than premeditated resentment.” Unrealistic and unexpressed expectations can destroy a relationship with another person or with God.

Expectations accumulate like stains on a white couch, appearing without our knowing where they came from. We clothe God with expectations derived from our daddy issues, Greek mythology, or the latest Morgan Freeman movie, because we all know that Morgan Freeman’s voice is actually God’s voice.

Those obsessed with control often develop an expectation for God to be a micromanaging deity. Those averse to judgment expect God to never step on anyone’s toes. We deify what we value.

We get our expectations of God from lots of places; our families, cultural myths or stories, movies, and the like. For instance, if you examine your family of origin, based on my experience, if you had a positive relationship with your own father, then it makes sense that you would draw meaning and trust in the metaphor of God the father. Those who had a negative experience with their father can’t have a positive relationship with God without jettisoning the ubiquitous, masculine imagery for God in Scripture. While this is unfair, it’s often true.

Expectations in our spirituality plays such a central role, because we are trying to build ideas about the unknown. It's much easier to start with what we know as the foundation.

Our brains prefer something easier to accumulate instead of the struggle to create out of nothing, so everything we see, and experience shapes our understanding of God, whether we want those experiences to influence our understanding of God or not.

This is why every soda taste test ever needs to be done without the labels. Coke vs. Pepsi, with the labels visible to participants, skews their judgment. This is why we have double-blind taste tests, which prevent biases from corrupting the results.

Yet, unmet expectations don't have to turn into resentment. We can work towards letting go of our expectations as we identify them, and embrace the reality that is all around us. Joy works this way. Joy isn't just another form of happiness. It isn't about smiling all the time or getting all the things you want under the Christmas tree. It isn't about having all those expectations come out the way you want them.

Joy isn't a shield from the world's problems and the crisis that we find ourselves in. It isn't the protective barrier that pushes away the hurt and ache of the world. This week, I cried as I sat and read of the death of a 7-year-old girl from Guatemala, who died of dehydration and shock after she was taken into custody by the Border Patrol agents last week. She was crossing from Mexico into the United States illegally to seek asylum with her father along a remote span of New Mexico desert. I cried, knowing that it breaks the heart of all involved, including the Border Patrol agents, to have this precious life lost. This tragic event should never be ignored or justified or swept away. My oldest daughter, Lia, is seven-years old. This ache has an added personal impact for me. This event, and so many others, breaks the very heart of Christ.

Joy, even the joy that comes through Christ, isn't a barrier designed to separate us from heartache like this one. We are not the order of the Jedi Knights taught to separate oneself from their emotions and practice a detached compassion. As Christians, we are taught to live like the incarnational Christ, who even knowing his ability to raise his friend Lazarus for the dead, wept for him.

No, the joy of Christmas, the joy of the incarnation of God indwelling in the world, is like a spine. When human beings come into the world, they come squishy and cuddly, and utterly helpless. My sister-in-law and her husband just had their first child, our nephew Jacob. And Julia was talking to her this week, and it reminded me just how utterly helpless are human newborns. Lots of animals, like giraffe's come out fully walking, literally as they are being born. A human baby is extremely vulnerable, but if you give them 20 years, they will have the strength and the intelligence – not to mention the opposable thumbs – to be the most powerful creature on the earth, assuming they

don't waste their days staring at a smart phone. The human's 33 vertebrae create a spine, which gives us a core to build around, not a barrier to be encased in.

The beauty of the human body is that our strength and sustainability come from the inside. That's where we return to our story for today. Mary and Elizabeth, two women from different generations. Mary comes visiting her "relative" Elizabeth in a Judean hill town, around 80-miles from her home in Nazareth of Galilee. She enters the house of Zechariah and greets Elizabeth in one of the most famous recognition scenes of all time, extraordinary because the recognition is utterly intrauterine! The spiritual commotion of fetal John – his own first prophecy – turns Elizabeth into a prophet: she is filled with the Spirit and utters a blessing that Mary is "blessed...among women." When they meet, Elizabeth learns what Mary already knows. Side note about that lovable Christmas song...Mary did you know? Of course, she knew!

Thus informed, Elizabeth stands as a profound symbol of potential for the new and surprising, the unexpected and joyous "the child in my womb leaped for joy." This motif of joy is astonishment. Two pregnant women, one young, poor, and unwed, the other far beyond the age to conceive – meet in the hill country of Judea to celebrate (and possibly commiserate) about their miraculous pregnancies.

This story is odd, fleshy, embodied, joyful, and an appropriate forerunner to the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, which is to come. In these women's actions, the world is indeed turned upside down. Hierarchies are subverted. The mighty are brought down. Two marginalized, pregnant women carry the future and proclaim the Messiah.

This is God subverting all expectations. Wouldn't it be great if there was just one life-changing moment that instilled faith and rescued the world? Wouldn't it be nice if all our problems got fixed just by saying they needed to, by pulling some grand lever and waiting for God to deliver exactly what we are hoping for like some cosmic slot machine?

Well life doesn't work that way for most of us. It's like swimming. Luke, in the book, tells a story about how change works, and I think it's apropos for how joy works. Joy doesn't come, because we wish it upon our lives. Joy must be the spine that holds up all the other parts of our life, the very 33 vertebrae that support structure upon which we can build faith, hope, and love.

Joy is like swimming. Luke first started swimming consistently when he was in his mid-twenties, because it seemed like the type of activity that wouldn't destroy his joints. On the first Monday in the lap pool, he struggled to swim one lap with his glorified dog paddle.

But he kept going, he kept showing up. Monday after Monday.

When he was in his early thirties, some friends asked me to do the 1.2 mile open-water swim leg in a triathlon relay. He never could have done that a decade before, but he was able to do it without any substantial change to what he was doing every Monday at the pool.

Even now, he can't remember when he stopped being a drowning hazard. The change happened during one of those boring Mondays in the pool. It wasn't a spectacular moment, just another Monday.

This is the spiritual journey, and the freedom from our unneeded expectations of God and our lives. Spiritual maturity comes not in a flash or moment of conversion. We would like a gain leap from expectations to trust, but that's not the way of growth. Growth happens during normal, boring Mondays.

Joy comes when we set down the expectations we have for our lives and our relationships. Like Elizabeth, joy and fulfillment came after she was of age to conceive. For Mary, it came before she was wed. For you, who knows when it will come.

Our charge, as Christians, is to faithfully do the work. To get in the pool, to practice again and again letting go of our own expectations, so that God might fill our lives with new purpose, compassion, and faith.

It's your choice, you can hang on to your expectations for your life or you can let go and learn to enjoy what God has instore for you. Even when things are spiraling out of control, and the most unnatural thing to do is to let go, that act of relinquishing control might be the only thing that can save us.

Or as Jesus was fond of saying it, to save our life, we must lose it. And as Barbara Brown Taylor says it, "We don't ever lose control, we only lose the illusion we ever had control."

Once you let go of your expectations, you become aware of a world of goodness on the other side of it. When we begin to eliminate our expectations, our eyes open to the beauty in everything around us. The joy that comes through an upside-down world where the mighty are brought down and the lowly are lifted up, where no 7-year-old girl ever dies, where swords will be beaten into plowshares, hunger will be satisfied, violence will be ended. Today is the day to prepare for the incarnational God moments yet to come where the powers that be will meet the topsy-turvy news of the gospel. It is first celebrated by two pregnant women laughing and singing. It enters the world through a young, unwed mother and a child to be laid in a manger, because there was no room at the inn.

So as long as our hands are clenched around our expectations, we will not be open to receive the joy God wants for us. Receive the God for who God is, the vulnerable, baby still in the womb of a vulnerable, poor migrant woman, who is about to usher in a whole new joyful world.