



**North Shore  
Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

***“Waiting in Joy”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Isaiah 11: 1-8; Luke 1: 39-45*

*December 13, 2020*

In my Thursday devotional, this week, I talked a little about the power of the story of Christmas – about the manner in which, no matter how well we think we already know the story, it can still manage to speak to us in new and profound ways. I mentioned, at the time, that this year is my 22<sup>nd</sup> cycle preaching my way through the Advent and Christmas season. I’ve easily preached over 100 sermons about the Christmas story over those years but still, each and every year, it never fails to find new ways to speak into my heart. This year, it was this exchange, in Luke, between Elizabeth and Mary. We’re going to talk about Mary’s side on Christmas Eve. Today, however, as we reflect on what it is to wait in joy, I want to turn our attention to Elizabeth’s reception of Mary and the news that she came to share.

We have to start by putting that conversation between Elizabeth and Mary into the context of the social strata and structures of the time. Elizabeth is the wife of a respected priest – that sets her pretty high on the social ladder of the time. Her culture would have understood her value, in the eyes of God, to be noteworthy. And, for her, that was only reinforced by the revelation, not only that she would have a child at such a late stage of life, but that her child would be the prophet who would pave the way for the promised Messiah. A lofty and respected role for the child of a respected family – it all fit! This made sense to Elizabeth – it would have made sense to those who knew her. Now, I don’t mean to normalize all of this but, as odd as it certainly was,

everything that was happening for Elizabeth fit within her place in culture and society. That is, of course, until Mary walks in.

Elizabeth is the wife of a priest. Mary is the fiancée of a carpenter who got pregnant before she was even married. The respective places of these two women, on that social ladder, was substantial. Mary would have owed Elizabeth respect and admiration. Mary would have looked up to the status of Elizabeth. Elizabeth would have expected that Mary would enter and praise her, and her child, for the role that John was to have in God's purposes. The interaction between Mary and Elizabeth would have been laden with familial, social and spiritual expectations that both of these women would have entirely understood. But, none of that happens. No, instead, Elizabeth starts paying homage to her lowly relative and asks, "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." It's a remarkable role reversal that I think could spawn a lot of valuable reflection. The line that I think is most worthy of our attention today, however, is Elizabeth's claim that the child in her womb leapt with joy, the moment Mary entered the scene!

There are so many things I would have expected from Elizabeth in that moment of Mary's entry.

- She might have expected Mary to praise her and her child.
- She might have anticipated that Mary would acknowledge how unique and special her child was.
- She might have sensed the blessed nature of Mary's child and reacted with resentment and disdain as she questioned how this person, below her in every way, would be given the privilege of bringing forth the King of the Jews.
- She might have responded with anger, frustration, doubt, condemnation, ridicule, and so much more.

But, she didn't. No, this woman whose culture gave her every reason to expect that she would be the blessed one, that her child would be more special than that of Mary, entirely turned the tables as she asked, "Why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"

The question that is begged, however, is, "Why?" Why did Elizabeth react that way? Why was Elizabeth so enthralled in that moment? Why is it that Elizabeth set all expectation aside and

cried out with joy over the blessing that stood before her? “For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”

That’s why she praised – that’s why she was so overwhelmed with joy at the arrival of Mary.

- When Mary walked into that room, Elizabeth didn’t see a lowly woman who should pay homage to her.
- When Mary walked into that room, Elizabeth didn’t see a carpenter’s wife who was being given blessings that were above her pay grade.
- When Mary walked into that room, Elizabeth didn’t see a level of privilege that exceeded her own.

No, when Mary walked into that room, Elizabeth saw the fulfillment of the story of which she, and her son, were going to be a part. When Mary walked into that room, Elizabeth saw the purposes of God unfolding before her eyes – and she was overwhelmed with joy that she got to be a part of it.

That, my friends, is what I want to suggest is at the heart of our privilege of waiting in joy. At its core, it’s a question of expectation vs. anticipation. It’s a question of whether we are waiting for that specific answer or blessing that we are convinced is that which should come, or if we are waiting for that blessing of the moment that we know might come in a plethora forms. It’s a question of whether we are waiting for our answer, or God’s.

I’ve likened it, this week, to opening presents on Christmas morning. I’ve teased Sharon, over the years, about my need to be particularly stealthy in hiding her gifts. It has lessened substantially as we have gotten older and holidays are far more about the kids than about us, but she was always the one far more apt to go snooping into boxes or closets to see what the gifts might be. Even today, if she has easy access to where her gifts are – she’s going to look. I, on the other hand, have always been the exact opposite. Put an open box of my unwrapped Christmas gifts right beside me, leave me alone for hours, and I won’t touch it. I don’t want to know. I want that pleasure of picking up a present with no information beyond that of from whom it is given. I want the moment of looking to see what’s there without any knowledge or foresight of what it is. I want the blessing of opening that package with joyous anticipation

without any of my expectation to cloud my delight. All I want to know is that that which I am opening is a gesture of the love of the other, because that knowledge, is where I find the joy.

When we were talking about this notion of joy, earlier this week, Julie remind me of the old platitude that happiness comes from others, while joy comes from within. And, in many ways, that's what we're pointing to here. The sometimes painful truth is that not all of our waiting, in life, is happy. Far more often than we'd like, our waiting is filled with angst, or strife, or sorrow, or pain. Those external forces with which we both cooperate and battle in life can make us wonderfully happy one day, and then drop us into profound sorrow the next. And often, in our times of real waiting in the face of the trials of life, the latter is our reality. Sometimes we are waiting in happiness, but the truth is that our waiting is often not a happy time in our lives. Often, our times of waiting are centered specifically around our expectation of that which will bring that happiness into our lives. And, all that's ok.

Joy, however, is something else altogether. Joy doesn't have anything to do with all of those external factors that run us up and down the roller coaster of happiness in life. Joy doesn't rely on the arrival of that which we are sure needs to come. Joy doesn't have anything to do with expectation at all. Joy comes from within. Joy comes from that moment of picking up a gift, knowing that some blessing stands before us, and experiencing the enthralling gift of anticipating the tangible unfolding of another's love and care in our lives. Joy comes from knowing that, no matter what the moment or the expectation, every morning is the new unwrapping of God's love and care in our lives.

Turn the tables and think about those gifts you are most excited to give on Christmas. I'd wager that the vast majority of them are those that the recipient has no idea is on the way. As simple as the gesture of a gift might be – that's the heart behind the joy we have in life.

- The greatest blessings we have known are the ones we never saw coming.
- The most wondrous gifts we've received in life are those that we'd never imagined before.
- Those pinnacle memories that stand out in our mind are so often of those moments that no one planned.

And yes, those are all moments of great happiness. But, the joy comes from the fundamental understanding that none of them were the resolution to our expectation. Happiness is the feeling created when the moments, both expected and not, unfold with blessing in our lives. Joy comes from the anticipation that, in God and in the love of those around us, those blessings are constantly unfolding, whether we expect them or not.

It's worth noting that, for Elizabeth, the joy literally started in her gut. The child within leapt for joy and the joy became hers. Not because she saw the unfolding of what she expected, and not because she saw the blessings of how she knew things ought to be. No, the joy became hers because, as that child leapt with joy from within, she saw that God was at work, she saw that she was given the gift of being a part of that work, and she knew that she could anticipate great things in God – no matter how they ever measured up to her expectations.

That's the opportunity we have, in faith, to wait in joy. At its core, it's a question of expectation vs. anticipation. It's a question of whether we are waiting for that specific answer or blessing that we are convinced is that which should come, or if we are waiting for that blessing of the moment that we know might come in that plethora of forms. It's a question of whether we are waiting for our answer, or God's. It's a question, I suggest, of whether we are going to wait in strife as we look for the happiness that stems from the expected resolution that we hope will come tomorrow, or if we are going to cling to the joy of waiting in anticipation of God, right here, right now, today.

Happiness will come and go as the days and the moments pass. Joy, however, is ours in every moment of every day, as we rest in the knowledge that God is at work, and we get to be a part of it!