

“Unexpected Joy”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 7-11

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour;
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion —
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.*

*Because their shame was double,
and dishonour was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore they shall possess a double portion;
everlasting joy shall be theirs.*

*For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,*

*he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

Luke 1:39-56

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 leapt 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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

*And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Will you pray with me? Gracious God you offer us the living word that is to live and dwell in each one of us. And as we hear your words for us this day, may we wrestle together of the ways in which you call us to be and to serve. In Christ's name, we pray, Amen. In the life of the church, the season of Advent is one of preparation and reflection. Some call it a kind of mini lent because the season includes a focus on repentance. We hear that emphasis in the advent reading such as the one from Mark last week about John the Baptist and the baptism of repentance and the confession of sins. I think for many of us confession and repentance are interchangeable words. But in reading with others the advent series by N.T. Wright, I began to look at those two words a little bit differently. And I found myself thinking that while they are certainly connected, they are not quite the same. I think confession seems to focus on admitting what we have done wrong, to acknowledge that our actions have hurt someone. Repentance though is connected with Greek origins meaning turning in a new direction. The Greek word is metanoia which connects to words such as metamorphosis or transformation. I think repentance invites us to do something different. It involves seeing things a new. A particular action and mindset is challenged not only about doing something differently but viewing things differently.

And I thought about an example might be the role of slavery. Someone once might have thought that slavery was acceptable even if they didn't own a slave. So they couldn't confess that they've owned a slave, but they could repent. They could turn away from thinking that slavery was acceptable. A movement from one belief, acknowledging that it was wrong, and seeing things in a new way. So for N.T. Wright advent is both about confessing one's sins and seeing things a new, or repenting. He shared an insight about the challenges of the gospel writers regarding the traditional understanding of the Messiah. For many people then, the long-expected Messiah was supposed to be a mighty warrior who would lead the people in battle to overcome the Roman empire and then return to the throne. He thinks though that the gospel writers are calling people to repent of that vision of the Messiah and consider another. The Messiah is not going to battle and sit on an earthly throne, rather this Messiah will be born in a manger, and seek to bring peace, and justice, and a new kind of kingdom. The world will be turned upside down. And I think repentance is certainly what's going on beneath the surface of this morning's gospel reading. Luke's stories of the birth are of angel messengers and unexpected pregnancies and a most uncommon birth. So we come into these stories-- the reading this morning just after Mary has received the message from an angel. The angel tells her she's going to bear the son of God. And I think this is a shock. After all, she is a common peasant who lives in a world rooted in her Jewish faith but a world occupied by the Roman empire. Life is not easy. There is a yearning in the air that a great Messiah warrior would arise to help them reclaim their nation.

There have been rumors and whispers about a Messiah who would come to save them. So to say that Mary is surprised is perhaps an understatement. She's thrown into a new world. One of confusion mixed with joy as she finds herself in the middle of a story in a role that she never had expected. So she repents of the expected and welcomes the unexpected. She lets go of one vision and receives another. Consider what happened just before today's passage. The angel says to her, "Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you." Mary, it says, was much perplexed by his words and pondered. In the word in Greek, it's Sambalusa. An amazing word. She pondered what this might mean. What on earth is he talking about? I can only imagine what went on in her head. And the angel replies, "Do not be afraid." Those familiar words of comfort. "You have found favor with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son. And you will name him Jesus. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of David." Now Mary knows how the world works and she says to the angel, "How can this be since I'm a virgin?" And the angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you. And the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The child to be born will be holy and called the Son of God for nothing will be impossible with God."

So Mary moves from disbelief to an odd, new awareness. From the feeling of what on earth to earthly wonder. And she speaks, and her words say, "I have heard what you have said, and I accept what is to be. Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." So Mary commits to a future that the angel describes. And what does she do next? Understandably she seeks out someone who just might understand what she's talking about and goes to see Elizabeth. And as we have heard, as she comes to the door, they respond together aware that something new is happening. When you consider the story side by side, they have a lot that's in common, and certainly some things that are different. Mary is a young woman, betrothed, yet not officially married to Joseph, and becomes pregnant with the Son of God. Elizabeth is a woman long married to Zechariah who yearned for a child. Her husband is the temple priest who receives a message from the angel just like Mary did. And he too is stunned by the message, literally into silence, for he has been told something he finds hard to believe. After all these years, his wife will bear a son. And his son will be a prophet who prepares a way for the coming of the Messiah.

While there are differences between them they share something in common. They are going to bring forth a new age. So when Mary appears at her door, Elizabeth knows. And not only does she know, the child within

her womb does as well. Elizabeth is startled, too, but startled with unexpected joy. The two of them repent of one long hoped for possibility of their people and open themselves up to another. Into the lives of these two women, amazing things will happen. Their perspectives have been challenged and changed and in this new world even the lowly play a part in its transformation. They find comfort from one another. Both with their similarities and their differences. And they share in a joy of the most unexpected news. And I think that's one of the challenges for us in Advent. We, too, are invited to repent. To see things differently. Some of us may be challenged by similar things. Some of us may be challenged in particular ways. Did we have an image of something and find ourselves having to let go of what we thought might be and welcome another possibility? Did we have to let go of one perspective or one way of doing things and welcome a new one? And when I came across a story in the news it spoke to me of the similarities and differences, the challenges of looking at the world anew. It was about the meeting of two people who seemed to have little in common, yet created an unlikely friendship that developed between.

Spencer [inaudible] a 22-year-old black rapper living in Harlem and an 81-year-old woman named Ross Gutman from West Palm Beach. They were paired up randomly when they were playing words online, which is like a Scrabble game. And they played over 300 games together during a year. They were competitive and they enjoyed that, but they began to text each other. "From day one," Spencer said, "I knew I was playing against someone different than me. And she was a lot of fun to have as a partner." And after a while, though, he knew he had to focus more on his work and so he took some time off. But before he signed off playing with Ross, he said, "Do you have a piece of live advice"? And she said, "Yes. Shoot for the stars. Whatever you want out of life, just go and grab it. Just go do it." But after a while he missed her. And so he resumed playing and they picked up where they had left off. One afternoon in a home of a friend named Hannah Butler in New York City they talked about people that had entered into their lives and brought something special unexpectedly. And he was telling them the story about his 81-year-old friend who lives in a retirement community in Florida. Hannah found the story fascinating and told her mother about it. And her mother, Amy, was also intrigued. See her mom's a pastor. She's the pastor of Riverside Church and she saw a good sermon illustration in the making. So pragmatic and thoughtful she thought about it and found it such a compelling story. She started thinking about the powerful message. And about what it means to be connected with someone you may have never met in person.

But one day she said, "Spencer, what if I could get you two together face to face"? And he said he would be willing to consider it. So she called Ross and checked her out, so to speak. And said, "Ross is hilarious. She's kind of like a character on Golden Girls [laughter]." So they soon planned a trip to Palm Beach. And from the moment that Ross and Spencer met they were like old friends talking. And their friendship took off on social media. Ross was surprised. She said, "What's so unusual about this? What's all the fuss"? But clearly because of the way it spread it touched the lives of people and resonated with them. It gave them a new perspective and some sense of hope because a most unlikely pair had found so much in common. She became a supporter and mentor and he brought the joy of a new friend into her life. So black and white, young and old, male and female, aspiring rapper of the North and retiree from the South found joy in their common humanity and gained a new perspective on friendship. And it reminded me of the words of the Messiah where we are told there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, northerner or southerner, young or old, black or white. All are one. Reverend Butler closed her interview by saying she felt so lucky to be a part of their relationship. In a time when we are divided so much by the fear of the other, people long for ways to connect. This story has two unlikely people becoming friends. It's beautiful. It's hopeful.

Mary and Elizabeth find a new vision and it's a most unexpected one. It is the story of the ways in which the spirit may unexpectedly work in the world making unlikely connections and new possibilities. The story of

Spencer and Ross is a reminder that divisions are often only imagined. And pushed us to consider to repent of old ways and welcome new ones. It's a reminder that in this holy season of Advent that the Messiah is someone who's going to bring justice and love and peace. So during this Advent into Christmas season may we welcome Lord Jesus and say, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, shape our lives, help us to learn anew of the power of love and hope that you offer to us through Immanuel. God who is with us now and forever, Amen.