

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**

**The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2020**

Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 1: 39-46

Sermon by Rev. Sue Trigger

Philippians 4:4-7 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 1:39-46 (Common English Bible)

<sup>39</sup> Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. <sup>40</sup> She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. <sup>43</sup> Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her." <sup>46</sup> Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

I realized far too late how much many of us would miss the cookie exchanges this year. We could have had a drive through cookie exchange! Why is it that it takes not being able to do something, before you realize how special something is? This year I imagine many of us will appreciate the joy that comes from sharing cookies and treats.

As we were making shortbread for Stewart this week, I looked up some history of Christmas cookies. I learned that our modern Christmas cookies date back to medieval European biscuits. By the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Christmas biscuits were popular throughout Europe and in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the Dutch settlers brought the tradition to the America. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, imported cookie cutters became available in the United States. These cutters often depicted highly stylized images designed to hang on Christmas trees. That made me laugh.

My mom tried that tradition one Christmas. She made beautiful gingerbread cookies and hung them on our Christmas tree. When she came home one day, she discovered that the cookies on the lower half of the tree were missing their bodies. There were just gingerbread heads hanging on the tree. Duke, their very large Doberman Pincer, looked sheepishly at mom as if to confess that he had enjoyed a bit too much gingerbread. That was the last year of cookies on the tree.

Those of you who attended the Advent Fair have gift tags that you have decorated and are ready to share. Perhaps this year you can share some joy by delivering a plate of cookies to someone with a happy message on your gift tag. Find someone who lives alone or is having a tough time. We could all use some joy this year when there has been so much we have struggled with.

On this third Sunday of Advent, we want to focus on joy. But first we need to remember the struggles Mary was dealing with when she went to see her cousin, Elizabeth. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly why she

went. Maybe it was to avoid rumors and finger pointing. It may have been to give Joseph some space to deal with the news that she was pregnant – and not by him. Or worse, maybe it was to avoid being stoned by people she had known all her life. That was the punishment for adultery at that time. Whatever the reason, even though she may have been excited about the baby, she was also carrying a heavy burden when she went to see her cousin. Her life was about to change forever and there was no way to hide it.

Elizabeth also had her own story to tell. The angel Gabriel had brought good news to her as well. She, too, was pregnant with a child who would proclaim the coming of the Messiah. No one could have understood what Mary was experiencing better than Elizabeth. As the gospel of Luke says, when Mary entered the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah, the baby leaped in Elizabeth’s womb. Elizabeth didn’t have to hear Mary’s story to know what was happening. The Holy Spirit revealed it to her. She was filled with the Holy Spirit and she cried out with a prophetic message, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

What a message of comfort and joy for Mary to hear. In each other’s presence, they understood that what they were sharing was the joy of the coming Messiah. While there is great joy in any pregnancy, these babies would not be ordinary men. Elizabeth would give birth to a great prophet and Mary would be the mother of the one her people had been anticipating for generations.

Mary shared the joy of the moment with a declaration of praise that became known as the Magnificat. “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” In that moment, Elizabeth and Mary were the only two people in the world who understood what God was preparing to do through these two women. It had to be a moment of amazement, wonder, and joy beyond measure.

Each season of Advent we celebrate this story of joy, but we seldom think about the troubled world these children were entering. They were living under the oppression of Rome, struggling with conflict among the Jewish leadership, Mary and Joseph were facing the possibility of being outcasts among family and friends, and on top of that they were poor. Into this time of unrest, God sent an infectious joy that would be shared throughout the world. God was answering their greatest need.

This year, we too, are living in a difficult time. The pandemic has taken far too many lives, closed too many businesses, taken too many jobs. In order to be safe, we have sacrificed relationships with family and friends. On the news you will hear about the “pandemic fatigue” that is impacting psychological and emotional well-being. The world is crying out in common lament – how long oh Lord, how long? And in the midst of our grief and struggle, the coming of Christ mass reminds us that there is hope. There is great joy for we are not alone. God is with us still. Christ will come again. Like a flame that burns in the darkness of night, the love of God is burning in our hearts, bringing comfort and joy.

How will you share the joy in your life this holiday season? What about taking some cookies to someone who is alone. Maybe your family could go caroling and sing “Joy to the World.” We are to be joy-bringers for Christ. May your heart be filled with the joy in your cookie sharing, caroling, and gospel sharing this year. Bring joy to a broken, hurting world. Amen.