

JOY
The Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:13-14, 44, 46-47; 2:10-11; 10:17-20; 24:50-53

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have been praying for a child. The older they become the more desperate their prayers become. Then one day Zechariah is visited by an angel who says, “*Your wife will bear you a child and you will name him John. You will have **joy** and gladness, and many will **rejoice** at his birth.*” This child John becomes known as the baptizer; the one who prepares the way for Jesus and his ministry.

During Elizabeth’s pregnancy she has a visit from her young unwed relative Mary, who just so happens to also be pregnant—mysteriously pregnant with Jesus. When Mary enters the house Elizabeth says to her, “*As soon as I heard the sound of your voice, the child in my womb leaped for **joy**.*”

Mary’s response to Elizabeth is known as the *Magnificat*. “*My soul magnifies the Most High, and my spirit **rejoices** in God my Savior, who has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant...*”

A few months later there are some shepherds going about their regular routine of caring for their sheep, when without warning, an angel appears, and says to them, “*Do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great **joy** for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah.*” What a spectacular birth announcement!

Joy! Great joy! The people have been anticipating a messiah. For years they have waited in expectation for the coming of a savior. They have longed for God to intervene into life on their behalf. They are a people in need of a savior. Times are difficult, the economy is bad, they are ruled by a government they cannot trust, their religious leaders are suspect, and everyday life has become drudgery. But now God is intervening. God is going to deliver them from what seems like meaninglessness. And the peoples response is to rejoice.

I want us now to fast forward some thirty years. Jesus has begun his ministry and has amassed a sizable following. Luke records the time that Jesus sent out seventy of his followers to share the message of God’s love. Listen as I read the account of their reporting back to Jesus and his response. (Read Luke 10:17-20)

Jesus encourages his followers to rejoice. He affirms their joy! Yet, he cautions them as to why they should be rejoicing. He does not want them to get so excited about the power they have over evil, the benefits that come by following him, that they miss celebrating the most important thing about following him—relationship with God!

Experiencing the joy of advent is our response to relationship with God. The

seventy were confusing the trees for the forest. You know the saying, “You can not see the forest for the trees.” Being unable to see the big picture because one is so focused on just a few trees. Jesus reminds his followers, the seventy and us, to keep the big picture in mind—relationship with God.

The rejoicing that Luke is so focused on in his gospel is about the big picture. Zechariah rejoices over the big picture. The baby in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy because of the big picture. And in Mary we hear this clearly when she says, “...*my spirit rejoices in God my savior...*” Mary realizes that all of the miraculous unexplainable events are about the big picture—God as savior! Relationship with God!

Last week we read where John writes that our love for God is not evidenced by our saying we love God but rather is evidenced by our love in action for our brothers and sisters. And today, Luke writes that our joy is not found, or evidenced, in the miraculous but rather in relationship. Spiritual joy is finding contentment and satisfaction in relationship with God regardless of our circumstances. Paul when writing to the Philippians describes it this way, “...*I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.*”

Many thought that the long awaited Messiah should be born into place and position—into royalty. For the royal Messiah would have a heart for the peoples condition but also would have the power to do something about it. What can the child of a peasant girl do?

And what about those shepherds? Shepherding was a despised occupation. Shepherds were considered shiftless and dishonest. I am sure that the Shepherds never anticipated that God would choose to use them to help bring people into relationship with God.

Luke concludes his gospel in the same way that he started it—with rejoicing! Listen and envision as I read Luke’s account of Jesus’ ascension into heaven. (Read Luke 24:50-53) Jesus has left his followers yet they are able to experience joy—great joy! And the joy they have is because that more than ever they are able to say as did Mary, “...*my spirit rejoices in God my savior...*” They have been in relationship with Jesus, and this brings them joy. Their relationship with God brings them joy. They still see the trees, the individual acts and gifts of God, but they also see the forest, what it is all about—relationship! They may still have it rough economically. Their government may still be corrupt. And their religious leaders may still be suspect. However, their lives are now more than meaningless drudgery. They are in relationship with the living God.

Friends, you do not have to have a theology degree, musical abilities, or have a

great understanding of the bible and doctrine in order to be used of God, to experience God, or to be in relationship with God. Even in the 21st century we can say as did Mary, “...*my spirit rejoices in God my savior...*” God chose to work through an unlikely peasant girl. There is nothing that keeps God from working through any of us. Rejoice at the prospect of being the channel of God’s love for others. Rejoice at the prospect of being a part of God’s plan to share His love through your regular routine, just as God did with the shepherds.