

Sermon– “Unexpected Joy”

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:39-56

December 15, 2013

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 35:1-10. Once again the prophet announces good news to the Hebrew people who wait in captivity for God’s renewing presence to set right what is wrong with their world. God will restore creation as well as humanity, and God will defeat the evil that distorts and disrespects life.

During Advent, the church remembers God’s renewing presence in the Christ child and affirms that God is at work, even now, to bring the world God’s gentle strength and well-being.

By embracing this hope, Christians are distinguished both from the despairing, who believe nothing can change, and from the self-sufficient, who believe they themselves will work the newness. Our life, against both temptations, is directed to the reality of God, the very God whom we discern in our present and to whom we entrust our future. Listen now for God’s word. (Read Isaiah 35:1-10.)

Our second scripture reading is Luke 1:39-56. A skilled storyteller and physician, Luke begins his gospel with two separate birth announcements: John, the Baptist and Jesus. Luke then poignantly brings these two stories together in a visit between their mothers’ Elizabeth and Mary. This morning we revisit this joyful and unexpected time in the lives of these two women and their meeting.

Elizabeth, who is old and unexpectedly with child, will give birth to John the Baptist. Her son will close an old age. Mary, who is young and unexpectedly with child will give birth to Jesus. Her son will usher in the new age. Even the unborn John knows the difference and leaps in the womb when Mary enters.

Luke is offering a historical reminiscence and making a theological point. He then gives both women an opportunity to express their gratitude and understanding of what God is doing in their lives. Listen now for God’s word. (Read Luke 1:39-56.)

The title of the sermon “Unexpected Joy”

*The text: For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” Luke 1:44*

Let us pray. Holy and Gracious God, you have come to us with good news and glad tidings and revealed yourself in surprising and unexpected ways. Give us eyes to see you clearly and lives which reflect your graciousness. And now, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts and meditations of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

The joy of Mary and Elizabeth is the joy of all who look forward with wonder and thankfulness to the birth of a child. When Luke joins this wonder with God’s saving work in the Christmas story, he gently reminds us that the experience of expectancy reveals some of the mystery of

how God works in our lives. Joy is, indeed, heightened in the anticipation and the waiting. And love is disclosed in the tenderness and promise of new beginnings.

Every birth, therefore, can be seen as a sign of salvation, of finding favor, of being blessed, of living with the promise and realizing its fulfillment. As a church family we share in the joy of new parents in our midst and we welcome their children with open arms. Likewise, when parents lose a child or the anticipation of a child, we recognize their loss and share their sorrow.

And so Mary's song of joy, on one level, is every mother's song uniting a common human experience and celebrating the privilege God gave women when God created humankind as male and female. Eve, in Hebrew, literally means *giver of life*.

And, yet, on another level, Mary's song is uniquely hers. She plays an incredibly significant role in the Judao Christian faith story. It is Mary who was chosen to bring God's son into the world. In her womb, she carried the One whom we call Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Emmanuel and most often, Jesus, which means *God saves*. Christmas is a time of unexpected joy because it is the celebration of the birth of our Savior.

This morning I invite us to reflect on Mary's role in the church over the years and her theological significance in the Christmas Story.

First, the Roman Catholic tradition gave Mary a prominent place, elevating her above all women and giving her the privilege of sainthood. As tradition evolved the theory of the Immaculate Conception developed. The meaning of this is that Mary was also miraculously conceived and sinless from birth. This was theologically important for the church fathers because it assured that Jesus was sinless! How could a sinful mother give birth to a perfect son?

Another traditional Roman Catholic belief is that Mary remained a virgin all her life. This denies Jesus' younger brothers and sisters and calls into question her marriage to Joseph. Perhaps this belief evolved because of how closely the Roman Catholic church came to align purity and chastity...so much so that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century priests and nuns were no longer allowed to marry and required to take vows of celibacy. There were the called, celibate priests and nuns who devoted their lives to studying scripture and there were the common, married men and women who were too busy raising their families and making a living to read their Bibles. Over the years, the virgin Mary lost all resemblance of humanity.

If the Roman Catholic Church erred in elevating Mary too high, to a place above humanity, making her more of a demigod than a humble maiden; the Protestant churches that evolved from the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century erred in the other direction.

John Calvin, who is known as the Father of Presbyterianism, felt so strongly about discontinuing the practice of sainthood, he insisted on being buried in an unmarked grave and coined the phrase *the priesthood of all believers*. In the Reformed effort not to set anyone apart, except Christ, Mary's role was diminished greatly, giving her virtually no place in the protestant tradition.

In both scenarios we lose sight of the theological significance of Mary's role in the Christmas story-- Protestants, because we have overlooked her almost completely; and Roman Catholics, because we have taken away her vulnerability and humanity, which is precisely why her presence is such cause for unexpected joy and hope.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. This is what makes it possible for Christ to be our Savior and to bridge the gap between God and humanity. The miracle of Christmas is the unexpected journey of God into our humanity. Our understanding of what makes this possible is articulated in the Apostle's Creed. We believe in *Jesus Christ...who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary*. If the Holy Spirit makes Christ's divinity possible, it is Mary who makes Christ's humanity possible. It is Mary's blood and Mary's flesh that make Christ human.

However, Mary's theological significance is even greater than this. In her song of praise, she reveals her understanding of what God is doing. By choosing Mary, the most common of maidens, God's character remains consistent with the prophet Isaiah's proclamation. What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God has consistently done for the poor, the powerless and the oppressed of the world. God has chosen what the world understands as ordinary and powerless to demonstrate God's extraordinary and powerful love.

God's entrance into the world by the backdoor of a manger reveals God's character. God stands with those who are marginalized by society, not against them. And God rejoices when they are accepted and embraced by the center. God binds up the broken hearted and comforts those who mourn. God strengthens those with weak hands, feeble knees and fearful hearts. *Comfort, comfort my people, says the Lord.*

The unexpected joy of Christmas is not only that God has visited God's people, but that when God did, we came face to face with One who surprised us with a graciousness and character beyond our understanding.

John Phillip Newell reflects on the meaning of the Christ-child. *The Christ-child is born of heaven and earth, of God and humanity, of time and eternity. Christ is not simply one or the other. Christ is both. And Christ shows us that we are both, that the spiritual and the material are one; that heaven and earth intersect in us.*

Two millennia following the birth of Christ, God continues to call ordinary men and women to extraordinary tasks by placing us in the right place at the right time, asking us to do the right thing and opening our eyes and ears to see and hear the difference we can make in the world.

May the spirit of the Christ-child live in our hearts. By the grace of God, may our journeys into the New Year take us to places of unexpected Joy and wonder. Amen.