

Leap for Joy!

Let us pray: Holy God, as we look forward to Christmas, refocus our hearts and minds on the Child in the manger who was born for our salvation too. Amen.

Between Mary's Song of Praise, and words of rejoicing in the Book of the Isaiah, we have a whole lot of leaping going on this morning! The return of the redeemed to their homeland foretells the dramatic homecoming of God's people from Exile. It's also describes a time of miracles and wonders as vs.5 in Isaiah proclaims: "the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer!"

A different sort of leaping is going on in the Gospel reading this morning, when the pregnant Mary is visiting her cousin Elizabeth who is also expecting. Vs. 41 reads, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb." As if the glad news of a baby on the way isn't enough, we have the infant, John the Baptist, in the womb, preparing the way for the yet to be born, Christ child!

Like many baby-kicking stories, this one also causes laughter and fills us with gladness and precious memories.

One of the imperatives of Advent is 'rejoice!'. In the Epistle reading assigned to this day, the apostle Paul exhorts us to "Rejoice always!" 'Tis the season to be joyful! But perhaps there are moments when we wonder, "How can I expect to be joyful in a time such as this?"

Several among us are experiencing loss and heartache this year-more than the usual amount- because of the coronavirus: so many deaths and so many losses; worries about the economy and jobs and evictions and the crazy political turmoil going on. Not to mention the ordinary woes of winter.

When our son was a preschooler, we were using an Advent devotional each day written by Jo Carr. We still have that copy with us after all these years. On one day, she begins by complaining, "'Tis the season to be jolly. But I'm not. I caught a cold ...my head is thick, my list of things still to be done is lengthy, and I can't think of what to have for supper tonight. Season to be jolly? Humbug!"

We all can certainly identify with this mother, and yet, in spite of the troubles we may be encountering this year or any year- in spite of the occasional feelings of sadness and dismay that pass over us like a rain storm sometimes, Christmas is still the best time of the year to "Rejoice". Because Christ is Born! Because "Emmanuel has come to us, O people of God"! Maybe we can't quite bring ourselves to "Rejoice **always!**" But perhaps we can at least "Rejoice **anyway!**"

One sure method of evoking joy for me is with music! As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, the first day of Advent we dig out all our favorite Christmas CD's. and play them often, at mealtimes, or when we're baking or

writing Christmas cards. I especially love to sing Christmas carols. Remember you all can do that this afternoon on Zoom with George Emlen!

The harsh realities of life don't necessarily ease up because it's Christmas; but, and here's the paradox of our faith: whereas happiness is usually easy to account for, joy, like love, is not. It often comes unexpectedly. As the Psalmist once put it, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning".

Joy is one of the spiritual gifts listed by the apostle Paul as a fruit of the Spirit. We read in Galatians 5 that the fruits of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Because true joy is a gift of grace; it doesn't depend on what we're going through or what we have or don't have.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe rejoicing, like thanksgiving, is very possible any time of the year and in any circumstance, because of that first Christmas. Remember the announcement of the angels to the shepherds: "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy! For unto you is born this day...a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Our joy has its source in God.

If you've read the Christmas story in Luke you may notice that after that first Christmas, we are told that the shepherds returned to their fields rejoicing. Why! For they listened to God's word around them and heard the angel's song and believed!

I remember when I was serving the Elmwood Community Church in West Hartford, CT, the congregation embarked on a search for a new hymnal. They decided on *The Chalice Hymnal*, published by the Disciples of Christ. When that denomination's hymnal committee took a survey they asked congregations all over the country to choose their favorite hymns. According to their research, the number one hymn chosen was, "Joy to the World". I believe it. We desire joy in our lives and that's okay, even though it is definitely counter-cultural in a world where there are plenty of cynics and a lot of skepticism. Yet, I have discovered that, where the Spirit is, there is always occasion for joy! And according to Psalm 139, there is no place where the Spirit of God is not present!

Christmas joy is quite often the joy of anticipation.

Mary Angela and I still laugh when we remember back to one Saturday morning when we were serving as Pastors in New Gloucester. I was pumping gas into my car at one of the local gas stations, Cloutier's. Across

the parking lot I recognized a young woman practically leaping out of her car. I had performed a wedding service for her and her husband the previous Summer.

With a great big smile on her face, she yelled across the parking lot, "Pastor Nick, I'm expecting!". She was overflowing with joy and her joy was contagious. Of course, other people who were outside the store that day, looked first at her and then at me wondering what we were smiling about.

Mary Angela joked with me later about this and said, "You know that is exactly how rumors get started!"

It's been my experience that experiencing joy in our lives coincides with a renewal of trust. It requires something like a childlike leap of faith. Trusting that God is with us. That God is at work in us and the world for good- not just as individuals but as a church, too.

Mary's trust in God was awakened not only through the mindboggling message of an angel.

Her faith was also rekindled through her encounter with her cousin Elizabeth. The kick of John in the womb, and the blessing of Elizabeth, validated Mary's experience, and strengthened her faith. Her joy erupted into singing, and so we are blessed with her sacred song, known since 4th century as the Magnificat:

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ... for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name." (Luke 1:46-47, 49)

God has acted decisively in Christ to reconcile and make new! This work has already begun and it yet continues. And we are invited to be involved personally in this work, even today.

In the famous song, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, do you recall the gift on the 10th day? "Ten lords a leaping"! Perhaps it brings a vision of *The Nutcracker* Ballet to mind.

This year it reminds me of our scripture lesson, in the first chapter of Luke, when Elizabeth when the child leaps in her womb! Just as the mother of John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit, may the Spirit fill us as well with all hope and joy and peace in believing that as well so that we may join heaven and nature and sing, "Joy to the world! The Lord is come!"