

## ***"Joy!"***

***Isaiah 51:1-4***  
***December 20, 2009***

***Luke 1:39-55***  
***St. James UCC***

***Preached by Rev. Dr. Robert Matlack***

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This is a wonderful time of year. Even with all of the difficulties and burdens that life brings, we are reminded in this season that we have much to celebrate, much to give thanks for. Life is a real gift, and God has blessed us - in the sharing of this gift of life and in the opportunities we have for the way that we live. Yet often it seems that in trying to appreciate the gift, we're celebrating the wrong things.

Have you ever noticed how much drinking can go on at Christmas parties. People are looking for some sort of escape, some sort of artificial joy... Certainly the frantic pace this time of year in the stores is anything but joy-filled. People tend to be harried and hurried and even downright grumpy... For people without families nearby or who are experiencing a painful loss or trauma in their life, Christmas can be one of the most difficult times of the year. They feel left out, out of sync with the celebrating that's going on. They feel alone and lonely.

There's an anonymous story about a happy Christmas party overflowing with children. In one corner sat a little boy crying, while the other kids were running around playing. "Why are you crying when everyone else is playing hide-and-seek?" he was asked. "Because nobody is looking for me," he replied. There's a universal feeling of loneliness, of wanting to be wanted, that is particularly prevalent at Christmas time. If you aren't busy with all of the usual Christmas activities, it's easy to feel left out. When your heart is weighted down by a particularly heavy burden at this time of year, you feel out of step - like nobody is looking for you. So, when do we celebrate the good news?

For the good news is very real, even though it's also often very different from what many people are celebrating this time of year. As Isaiah tells us, the good news comes to the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives... The good news comes to those who are at a low ebb, feeling defeated and alone.

That's how the Israelite people were. They had been conquered, exiled from their land, and when all seemed hopeless, when it seemed that God had abandoned them. Isaiah brings them the good news of deliverance, that God is not finished with them yet. The future has still to be written, and their future will be very different from their past. Grief will be turned to joy. Sorrow will be turned to praise, and a people who have turned from God will live as God's children.

Our problem with celebrating the good news is that we tend to get distracted. As a society we are distracted by the materialism. Christmas often seems to be about things - about the presents we give or receive, about the fancy parties we go to or the clothes that we wear or the decorations that we hang. We become so distracted by those ways of celebrating that we start to think that they're what it's all about, and somehow the celebrating becomes empty and hollow.

You see, the parties, the decorations, and the gifts will all soon fade. If they are all that we receive, all that Christmas is about for us, then we have missed the real gift, the most important reason we have to celebrate, the gift that will still be with us long after the others have faded and become but distant memories.

Mary knew the gift of Christmas, after the angel had visited her and shared the news. Now remember, this was news that was upsetting in that it certainly turned all of her plans for her life upside down, changing everything and having the potential to undercut all of her hopes and dreams. It was news that was unexpected and caught her totally by surprise. Yet, it was also news that she accepted and then celebrated.

We're told that she rushed off to visit her relative Elizabeth, for as you remember, part of the proof that the angel offered her was the message that Elizabeth whom everyone knew could not have children, that same Elizabeth was now pregnant. So Mary went to see Elizabeth and immediately saw the truth of the angels words. Elizabeth was not only pregnant, but the child within her moved, acknowledging the lordship of the Christchild whom Mary carried in her womb.

Mary tried to absorb all of this that had happened to her so suddenly as she heard Elizabeth say, "You are the most blessed of all women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

In all that had happened to her, and now in the action of John and the words of Elizabeth, Mary saw that she indeed had much to celebrate, much to give thanks for. So she spoke the words that have become so famous, the words of the "Magnificat" or "Mary's Song of Praise", in which she says, "My heart praises the Lord: my soul is glad because of God my Savior". She goes on to express her thanks to God on two levels - her personal thanks for what had happened to her. She is but a lowly handmaiden and will be called blessed by all generations. God has chosen her to work through, God has chosen her to be the mother of the Christ child, and she is honored and humbled by this choice.

But Mary is also giving thanks for the great things God has done for Israel and for all nations, by reaching out to people everywhere in love. As she says, "He has stretched out his mighty arm and scattered the proud with all their plans. He has brought down

mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors and has come to the help of his servant Israel.”

Mary knew and celebrated all that was to come. For though the Messiah could and would do great things, and while Mary certainly didn't know the details of all that would happen, she trusted that these things would be wonderful indeed, that the Messiah would change our lives and our world, forever.

Remember the little boy who just wanted somebody to be looking for him? That's what Christmas is all about. In Jesus Christ God has come looking for each of us. We are not alone, and so we have reason to rejoice. In Jesus Christ God has come and declared a special love for us. The joy that we feel in response is one of the special gifts of Christmas.

In the concluding portion of our worship this morning, the members of our church school will reenact the Christmas story. There will be a real baby in the manger. As you see Zachariah and the other children up here, remember that they are meant to point us to another real child who was born in a real manger almost two thousand years ago. It is Jesus' birthday that we are celebrating! It is God's love that has come to us and has given us many reasons to be thankful. Today, and throughout this Christmas season, let us rejoice, for God has done great things! It is God who has given us these marvelous gifts.

Amen.