

## “Why Not Joy?”

Luke 1:8-9, 11-15a, 24-25; Luke 1:26a, 39b-45, 57-58 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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Third Sunday of Advent ~ Joy!

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our spirits might be softened so we can receive your unexpected presence with rejoicing. In the name of the One coming into the world, Amen.*

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Imagine , if you will, a beautiful flower. It’s a very special flower, with beautiful blossoms, and a lovely fragrance, and let’s say maybe its petals have important medicinal properties if brewed into a tea. In order to grow this flower, you have to tend the soil very carefully. It has to remain a certain balance between wet and dry, and the pH of the soil has to stay within a pretty narrow range, or the seeds won’t be able to take root and grow. But the seeds are the most interesting part. Because you can’t buy these seeds. You can’t even get them off the plant at your neighbor’s house. Because these seeds will only grow if they’ve been deposited in your carefully tended soil by a select variety of birds, after having been properly fermented by the digestive enzymes of those certain birds. Now, of course, there are things you can do to attract those birds, like putting out the various kinds of things they like to eat. But you can’t make them drop those seeds into your garden; you just have to hope that they might. And yet, so many gardeners will tend their soil with this goal in mind, because the flowers are just that lovely. The name of this flower, of course, is Joy.

Now, you know that I am not a gardener, so I can't promise this analogy makes any sense. But what I'm trying to get at is that Joy is a gift of God. Those birds are the Holy Spirit. Joy is a gift of God, delivered by the Spirit. And yet, as the story of Elizabeth shows us today, Joy can only take root if the ground has been properly cultivated.

The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah is full of unexpected surprises. An unpleasant surprise that unfolded very slowly for them is that they became old without having any children. It's not what they imagined their lives would be like. And I'm sure they kept hoping maybe it would change. But at some point, it seems like they must have admitted that this was the way things were going to be. Elizabeth is identified as barren, so they must have recognized their reality. But how long did it take to accept that? And what did it do to their hearts? The scriptures describe them both a righteous and faithful. Somehow, they managed to hold this disgrace without letting it stop them from proclaiming and living the compassion and grace of God. And then, suddenly, long after anyone would have expected anything to change, this angel arrives, Gabriel, and tells them that now their time has come; they will become the parents of a baby boy!

There are other surprises in here, like Zechariah's nine months of muteness and the command to name the baby John, rather than a traditional family name. But the real surprise to me is Elizabeth's reaction. After all that time, enduring the disgrace her barrenness brought, resigning herself to the invisibility of childlessness and the

potential vulnerability of being a widow with no heirs to protect her, Elizabeth easily could have greeted the news of her forthcoming son with hollow bitterness. But she didn't. She greeted this life-changing information and its subsequent fulfillment with joy.

It's interesting, I thought, how many times joy is mentioned in these verses about John, especially considering what we know about his life and his death. Gabriel tells Zechariah that they will have "joy and gladness." Elizabeth proclaims, even as she enters into seclusion that God has "looked favorably on me." When Mary, newly carrying Jesus, arrives at Elizabeth's house six months after this unexpected conception, the baby in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy." And after John is born, Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives rejoice with her. There is so much these new and unexpected parents don't know about where their child's life is going to lead, but these moments – these moments at the beginning of it all – are pure joy.

So why joy? Why not bitterness? Elizabeth had gotten used to not being a mother; she had quite probably even been able to name a couple of the blessings of not having children by then. Children are work; children are worry. That moment had come and gone, and she'd likely put some energy into being okay with the way things were. But then that particular bird hovered over her garden, and it turns out that, against all odds, Elizabeth had been maintaining one small part of the garden of her heart to receive that precious seed. And that's just it. Joy is a gift from God, but unless we have been keeping our hearts open and soft and welcoming, we may not be

able to receive it. And somehow, even through the long years of her “disgrace,” Elizabeth had stayed open to joy.

When our expectations are upended, we’re just as likely to be irritated and resentful as we are thankful or joyful. We like the illusion that we know where our lives are going. Even if the change is for the better, we often take some time to make the pivot and get with the program. Sometimes we resist a new reality with our whole being and miss the joy bus completely, preferring to remain stuck at the corner of misery and familiarity.

In one of my morning news emails today, I read about a “surprise ceasefire.” It wasn’t, of course, for how could such a thing be a surprise? Many people on both sides of the conflict in Ethiopia have been working toward this ceasefire for weeks and months even. Many others from around Africa have been working with them, hosting and guiding peace talks, encouraging, challenging, no doubt praying. And yet, a ceasefire is always surprising, isn’t it? One day, people are shooting at each other; the next day, they lay down their arms. And who can say which dialogue it was, whose heart finally softened, whose mercy that was extended found its rightful home in another soul? And we must keep praying, for while many will receive this unexpected good news with joy, we know that there are always others who’ve become so entrenched in the mindset of vanquishing their enemies that they can’t embrace peace. We must keep tending the soil to receive the good news of great joy that the Holy Spirit may pour forth at any moment.

As I mentioned earlier, I found the numerous mentions of joy in the story of John's birth surprising, given how unconventional and eventually tragic his life was. But maybe it was precisely the spiritual formation of resigning themselves to childlessness and then embracing God's gift of joy that prepared Elizabeth and Zechariah to be John's parents. When you're just happy to have him, maybe you don't get as upset by his choices to live down by the river, wearing camel's hair and eating locusts. Elizabeth and Mary were, in some ways, at opposite ends of a spectrum, in terms of their positions in their society. One was approaching elderly but well regarded as faithful and righteous. The other was young and unknown, her life barely having begun. But they were equally unexpected agents for the world-changing project God was beginning through them. And that, also, is part of the Advent story. The more unlikely you imagine it would be for God to invite you into the Good that is being wrought in the world, the more probable it is that you need to get involved. Disciples pastor and author Dawn Darwin Weaks reminds us, in her recent book, that one of God's other names is Surprise. Perhaps the best spiritual practice we can engage in during Advent is being open to welcoming surprises with joy. Perhaps that is the best way to prepare to receive the Christ Child. We cannot make the flower grow, for only God can provide the seed. But we can tend the soil of our hearts, making sure not to let our souls get too dry. We can hold onto the hope of peace, even when peace seems impossible, so that when peace breaks out, we can rejoice and sing. Hallelujah and Amen.