

Expecting Joy
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Luke 1:39-56

It's not Christmas...yet. We are still waiting, still expecting. We are making arrangements, albeit, a little different this year. Many of us are setting up video chats in place of traveling to family. We're competing in light displays, with the local Home Depot selling out of lights the earliest they ever have on December 7th! Instead of festive company holiday parties we're working from home, sneaking in batches of cookie baking between conference calls. None of this is what we may have expected.

It reminds me of another village preparing to welcome Christmas: Children ready to rush for their toys – to make a great noise. Families, young and old, sitting down to a great Feast, featuring a big bowl of who-pudding and rare who-roast beast.

During the night, a neighbor to the North decided he must stop Christmas from coming, so he went about – moving feverishly from home to home – faster than a sleigh racing down the mountainside. He took it all away, all the expected traditions of Christmas day.

And after taking everything, the story takes a pause. As the Grinch listened in the quiet of the morning, he heard an unexpected song of Christmas Joy. *"How could it be? How could be?"* The Grinch asked himself.

How can all those people in Whoville get up on Christmas morning without the glamour of Christmas? All their preparations, the fancy table settings, the over-stuffed stockings, the anticipation of giving and receiving... to have it all taken was not what they expected.

But what do those 'Whos' do? They SING! Not a sad song. Not a song of lament. No, a SONG OF JOY! For they knew as they grew from little girls and boys that a WHO's life was more than toys, and LOVE is a thing to celebrate. And over time it became written on their hearts and in their mind.

And because of that, they did not Fear. For they knew "God is near!"

You remember what happened next. That Grinches small little heart grew and grew as the spirit filled it with a love he never knew before. He said,

“Maybe Christmas doesn’t come from a store, maybe Christmas, perhaps... is just a little bit more.”

When we hear and see the story of How the Grinch Stole Christmas, we know how it turns out.

It is the same with the nativity story. We all know how it turns out.

So maybe there’s no way to recapture the initial shock of the news that Mary received: that God is coming in the flesh to show us what real life looks like.

Mary was engaged, getting ready for a marriage ceremony when she learned she was pregnant. What she could expect, was to be banished, stoned, tossed away, not to be told that she was carrying the Messiah. Her life was forever changed, she became the one God would recruit to bring the light of truth into the world.

And when she arrives from her 80-mile journey to her cousin Elizabeth’s house, Mary wraps her in a warm embrace. Clearly the winds of the spirit were at work, causing the child growing in his Elizabeth’s womb to be so overwhelmed that he jumped with JOY.

There’s a yearning in Mary’s heart, like the yearning in Elizabeth’s heart as they meet.

It mirrors the yearning within the hearts of their people, who had known centuries of sorrow.

Six hundred years before Mary arrived at Elizabeth’s door, the golden city of Jerusalem was devastated by the armies of the Babylonian empire, and nothing had ever been the same. Over the centuries the land and her people were occupied first by Babylon, then Persia, then Greece and now Rome.

They had no freedom. They enjoyed no shalom. The good life was reserved for those in power, and they had to make do as they could, as aliens in their own homeland.

The people’s hearts were weighed down with centuries of sorrow and ancient grief. God brought them out of Egypt, out of slavery, delivered them from oppression, to make them a people who would be a light to the nations, modeling the ways of justice and faithfulness and love for all to see.

But they had failed miserably.

They and their leaders, with just a few brilliant exceptions, had shown themselves to be just like everybody else,

motivated not by love but by greed;
thirsty not for peace, but for power and wealth;
servants not of their God, but of their own whims and desires;
just like everybody else.

And they suffered for it, for generations.

They yearned for a new king, a messiah, one who would bring the Spirit of God among them again, one who would rule justly, who would judge the poor fairly, who would defend the rights of the widows and orphans.

They were yearning for God to keep the promise made to their ancestors, to come to them and help them. Emmanuel! God is with us!

Their yearning is our yearning, too.

With them, we are yearning for tomorrow, for a new day, when this world is put right, when there will be no more grief or crying or pain.

We are yearning for tomorrow, believing that it can be different, and not just more of the same.

We are yearning for Emmanuel, for God to be among us, for God to come to us, for God to come here ... now.

Did you hear Mary's song? God has remembered me ... God has stretched out a mighty arm ... God has filled the hungry with good things ... God has kept the promise ...

And yet... they and all their people are still what they have always been. Rome is still in charge. The rich are still rich, the poor still poor, and the hungry still hungry.

So why is Mary singing songs of praise and Elizabeth's baby jumping for joy? What has changed?

What has changed is that Mary is pregnant with the promise. There is already a reason for joy, because tomorrow is already carried in her, today.

Which means that tomorrow is already carried in us, today.

My favorite line of this story comes at the end: "*Mary stayed about three months with Elizabeth and then went back home.*"

Mary went home! Back to Nazareth. Back to her baffled fiancé.
Back to the physical, emotional and spiritual demands of pregnancy.
Back to the struggles and sorrows of this life; and to the sorrow, as Simon
will later say to her, that will break her own heart.

She goes home to all that her life still is and will be, and yet, she is filled
with joy, because God is with her, because God is with her people, because
God is with us, because she carries within her own body... Emmanuel.

Today, we too will go home. We will go home to our own little houses in our
own little towns, perhaps to families or maybe alone, facing the demands
and struggles and sorrows of our own lives as they are.

But we will go home filled with joy, because God is with us, Emmanuel is
carried, too, in our bodies.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; Cast out our sin and
enter in; be born in us today! We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad
tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel! Amen.