

Putting Together Christmas Sermon Series  
3 – Enjoy the Present - Luke 1:26-38  
Dec. 23, 2018  
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This is just one of the best Sundays of the year. I know we're technically still in Advent, but Christmas is so close you can almost reach out and touch it. Kids are so excited about unwrapping the presents, parents are excited about not having to buy any more presents, and we all have the potential to be excited for the hope and peace and joy and love that Jesus is bringing to us on Christmas.

Are you expecting those things? It's OK if you're not, because this season does its best to wrangle the hope and peace and joy and love right out of us. Is there any season more stressful than Christmas? One trip to the mall or post office is all we need to remind us of how easily this season of anticipation turns into one of frustration. That's the great irony of what this season has become. Of all the times of the year, this is not supposed to be the season of stress. It's not "God Fret You Worried Gentlemen" or "O Come All Ye Frazzled." The arch-angel didn't tell the shepherds that he was bringing tidings of great stress. He said he was bringing tidings of great joy. But in the midst of our stress and the challenges to our faith that our violent world gives us, we sometimes miss out on that joy as it becomes overshadowed by real-life concerns.

Just this past week, my family experienced this in very real ways. First, in the middle of a search team meeting, I got a call from our daughter Sydney that she was on the shoulder of New Circle Road with a flat tire. Then, later that night while I was in our basement, I heard a hissing noise and thought a snake had invaded our home. Turns out it was a leak in the hot water heater. It's one of the few times in my life I would have preferred a snake. And the next night, on the eve of her biggest finals, our daughter Molly stepped on and broke her glasses. "Stress to the world, the bills have come." And just like that, the spirit of Christmas is gone.

Too many times during this season, we trade enjoying the spirit of Christmas for counting the costs of Christmas. It's true when it comes to our schedules and our pocketbooks and even our diets. I'm just as guilty of this as anybody. I can't tell you how many times I wanted to find joy with a few of those sugar cookies with the Hershey's kisses in the middle, but then fretted over extra calories and pounds that went along with it. Commentator Phillip LeFebvre makes an interesting point about this exercise. He says that if you stand in front of the dessert table, calculating calories in your head, trying to decide if that chocolate chip cookie is going to end up on your hips, you are actually doing more damage to your heart from the stress than if you simply ate the darn cookie in the first place!

We've been taught or trained or conditioned by our culture that we have to monitor our credit score and calculate our saturated fat and count those calories – there's even an app for that! And as well-intentioned as those efforts are, they can produce a lot of stress in us. And in this season, that stress added onto all the other stress of Christmas completely distracts us from what Christmas is all about. We are too preoccupied to simply stop and enjoy the present.

What if Mary had been more concerned about her girlish figure than being the vessel for delivering God to earth? What if Mary had said "no" to the angel? Today we think of Mary as one of our exemplars of faith, revered all over the world, especially by our Catholic brothers and sisters. It is estimated that 2 billion Hail Marys are said every day. Here in the U.S., there is a hotline you can call to get updated information on Mary sightings and inspirational Mary messages. It's 1-800-345-MARY. It's true, I called it. I was put on hold, so while I waited I said

a few Hail Marys. Mary's popularity is like that of a rock star. She was the Madonna before Madonna was Madonna.

But in the Bible, she's not famous. Quite the opposite. She's an unknown, unwed teenager who is confronted with life-changing news. What if she had been so stressed out by the annunciation that she had refused the joy offered her? She had every right to, you know. She was in no position to take on the responsibility the angel was putting before her. She was engaged to Joseph. How would she explain this pregnancy? She could tell the truth, but who would believe that? She was young, poor, and female, all characteristics that people of her day would say made her utterly unusable by God.

The angel Gabriel comes and tells Mary that she is going to have a baby, and that he will be named Jesus, and that he will be the Son of God. And then Mary finds herself smack dab in front of the dessert table, stressing out over this news. If she accepts, she will be the earthly vessel for a divine gift; she will be the mother of the son of God. But it also means that very soon it will be obvious that there's more than a cookie in her belly, and along with the demise of her girlish figure will be the destruction of her marriage and her reputation. She could even be put to death for this.

She asks only one question: How can this be? It's not a question of doubt, but a question of logistics. I don't know about you, but I would have, say, a thousand more questions. What's going to happen? Will Joseph stick around? Will my parents still love me? Will my friends stand by me or will I get dragged into town and stoned to death? Will the pregnancy go all right? Will the labor be hard? Will there be someone to help me when my time comes? Will I know what to do? Why me? Christmas for Mary meant anxious questions with few answers.

And yet...she says yes. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." She takes the risk, she takes a big bite out of the opportunity put before her, and she accepts God's joy. There are a lot of reasons she could say no: not the right time, not the right place, not the right partner, not the right family planning, not the right future plans. And yet, instead of weighing the pros and cons, instead of counting the costs, she simply enjoys the present that has been given to her. She says yes.

So I want you to say yes this Christmas. Come on, it's Christmas. Relax. Eat. Enjoy. January's coming soon enough. There'll be 11 months for resolutions and diets and soy milk. Accept the joy that is given this season, both spiritual and culinary. Receive the gifts, those given in a cookie tin and the one that comes in a manger. This season is about joy, first and foremost, regardless of what our world tells us.

I almost forgot that once. One year, a church member dropped off some M&M cookies by the office for us to share. It was a wonderful gift, and she told us that a lot of love went into those cookies. After she left, I stood there agonizing over whether to eat one or not, those red and green M&Ms staring up at me symbolizing my inner turmoil: "Stop!" "Go!" "Stop!" "Go!" I was saying to myself, "Gosh, I don't know. It's only a few hours until dinner, and I didn't go to the gym yesterday, but I did have a salad for lunch. But I also had two donuts for breakfast. OK, three. I probably shouldn't." And then I realized what I was doing. These cookies were a gift, made with love, and I was rationalizing why I shouldn't accept this gift. It's not the right time, it's the not the right place, I don't deserve such a gift.

Christmas is more than a chance to eat and open presents. It's also a chance to open ourselves to Jesus, and to be filled, to be satisfied, to be nourished, to be strengthened for growth. It's a time to recommit ourselves to God and to recommit our lives to worshiping and serving God. It's a chance to let the birth of Christ lead to a new birth within us. His birth was not only

life-changing 2000 years ago; it can be life-changing for each of us today if we allow his light to shine through the clutter of this season. Jesus isn't coming again to fix things for us. He's coming to inspire us, to empower us, to instill us with the hope and peace and joy and love that this world so desperately needs. He's giving those things to us so we can give them away to others.

We don't have to accept God's joy, you know, any more than Mary was required to accept the angel's offer. We can continue to let stress rule in our lives, to be more concerned about saving than serving, more concerned about counting costs than reaping rewards, more concerned about what we can't have in our lives than what we're truly missing in our lives. We can say, "It's not the right time, it's not the right place, I don't deserve such a gift." Well, none of us do. But we've been given it just the same, and there's never a wrong time or a wrong place to recommit our lives to following Jesus. This is the season of joy which marks the coming of Emmanuel. Will we let ourselves be open to that joy, or will we get so caught up in the chaos that we won't even notice God is with us?

I give thanks that my family has the resources to belong to AAA and for their employee Jacob, who fixed Sydney's flight tire in the midst of a steady rain. I give thanks for David Wiseman, who replaced our hot water heater the same day for a lot less than we expected to pay. I give thanks for my super-hero wife, who was waiting at the optometrist when the doors opened and had a new pair of glasses to my daughter before her first exam. Were all of those stressful situations? You bet! But they also all contained reminders of how blessed we are, and how those situations offered gifts for us to gratefully receive.

Enjoy the present. Soak in the blessings. Eat the cookie. Would you rather have a few pounds gone, or that wonderful memory? Would you rather have a few extra dollars in your account, or the feeling of giving away the joy of Christmas? Would you rather have a little more time to watch TV, or the knowledge that the service you're doing for the church or the community is making a difference in someone's life? This world needs to know that Christmas still matters, that the followers of Christ haven't given up on changing the world, that the hope and peace and joy and love Christ rings can make a difference. The gift of Christ is once again being offered to each of us. It's up to us, really. We can choose to accept it or we can choose to be too busy, too distracted, too scared to say, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." If you ask me, I'd simply thank God and enjoy the present. Merry Christmas!