

A Weary World Rejoices sermon series  
Connecting to Christmas – Luke 1:25-45  
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For the eight years I lived in Chicago, my family had a yearly Christmas ritual. On the day after Christmas, which was also the start of my vacation, we would load up our car with suitcases, diaper bags, snacks and drinks, strollers, pack-n-plays, presents, and then squeeze in ourselves, to make the six-hour drive to Jeffersonville, Ind.

To pass the time, we'd play games like "On which Chicago highway would you like to sit in traffic?" and "Can you hold it until we get to the Chick-Fila in West Lafayette for lunch?" We'd enact this ritual every year, subjecting ourselves to the traffic and the bad weather and the construction and being confined in a small space with two little kids. By the time we got to Jeffersonville, I was more Scrooge than Santa. Why in the world would we do this each and every year?

Because our family lived in Jeffersonville, and when it comes to this time of year, there's something in our spiritual DNA that craves that connection. Even if some of our family members are nuttier than a fruitcake, we're meant to be together. And as a sidenote, if you think all your family members are normal, I'd like to invite you to consider the possibility that you are the crazy one. Follow me for more hard truths.

This Advent season, we're asking the question, "Can we still rejoice in the midst of our weariness?" As the exhaustion of the holiday season overtakes us, as the perilous state of our world threatens us, as the reasons to be fearful mount, can we still find joy in what Christmas offers us? Honestly, I have my doubts, so we're turning to the gospel of Luke to help us understand the gift of joy the Christ child is bringing us this Christmas.

We're doing this through the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, two minor players in the story. Last time, we learned that Zechariah, a priest, is told by an angel that his elderly wife Elizabeth is going to have a baby, and when he questions this incredulous news, he's struck mute, a fact which probably caused his congregation to rejoice. In today's reading, we're introduced to Mary, the unwed teenager, and her cousin Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife.

Like Zechariah, Mary is visited by an angel and told she's going to have a baby. She accepts this news by saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let's do this thing." After the angel leaves, Mary hightails it out of town, probably because she didn't want to face the ridicule and scorn of the villagers and her fiancée Joseph when they discover her growing belly isn't from eating too many Christmas cookies. She makes the 80-mile trek to her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who is also miraculously expecting a baby.

So, that sets the stage: one woman, pregnant far sooner than expected, facing harsh social criticism and banishment for being unwed and pregnant; and another woman, pregnant long after her hope had died, enduring a risky pregnancy that could threaten her life and the life of her child. Both are hiding their news because there's no way people would believe their stories. In fact, the only person who would accept them without question is each other.

They were in the midst of what Dr. Virginia Hoch called a "stable time." That doesn't mean "stable" in the sense of steady or secure. Mary and Elizabeth's situation was far from stable in that sense. But what Dr. Hoch meant by "stable time" is a time when we can glimpse God breaking into our world, as God does at the stable in Bethlehem. Mary and Elizabeth, as they met to share their divine secrets, are experiencing a "stable time." They are bonding over

their shared experience, and this potentially tense scene is instead overflowing with the joy of connection to God and each other, so much so that Elizabeth's baby joins in the celebration.

What would make you leap with joy, to celebrate wildly without inhibitions? You may remember that in the 2014 NCAA tournament, Kentucky made an improbable run to the national championship, thanks to some clutch three-pointers from Aaron Harrison. Three games in a row, he hit a late basket to give the Wildcats the lead. Here's my situation for each of those games: my wife and youngest daughter asleep in their rooms. My oldest daughter, Sydney, and me glued to the television downstairs watching the game. We were trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to wake the others, so in each game, when Harrison hit his clutch shot, we emitted the loudest whisper scream you've never heard as we danced around the living room. Our dogs were very confused!

That's the kind of joy I see with Mary and Elizabeth, so much so that the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. I can only imagine the feelings of isolation and anxiety that both women were holding. Elizabeth couldn't talk to her husband about it – remember, he was mute – and Mary didn't have a husband to talk to. I believe at least part of the joy in this scene comes from the fact that when Mary arrives, Elizabeth realizes she's no longer alone, and she has someone with whom she could share her wide range of emotions. For the three months they were together, they bore each other's burdens and carried each other's joy.

I'm sure it wasn't all dancing and singing and dreaming about the future. They were both facing difficult situations. But their connection to each other was a tangible reminder that they did not need to do this hard thing alone. There was someone else who knew them, who understood, who accepted them just as they were without expectations or judgment.

We all need those people, don't we? I met with a couple this week who are facing some health challenges, and the first thing I did was connect them with another family in a similar situation. In fact, in many counseling situations, I try to help the person in crisis find other people who can relate to their situation. There's something powerful about being with someone who implicitly understands the emotions you are going through.

Christmas Eve 2021. What I thought was going to be a few-week break from community worship in March of that year had turned into a nine-month exile, thanks to Covid. We didn't worship together on Easter, there was no Vacation Bible School, and much to my chagrin, we hadn't had a single church potluck. Christmas Eve is one of my favorite worship services of the year, and I couldn't imagine going through that night without being together. We pre-recorded the service a few days earlier, so on the night of Christmas Eve, I had nowhere to go.

So I came here. I turned on the spotlight on the nativity scene and left the rest of the sanctuary dark. I sat in the front pew and I prayed, without even knowing what to pray for. I missed you all so much. Not surprisingly, I cried my way through the prayer, then got up to leave.

As I looked down the length of the sanctuary into the courtyard, I thought I saw a single flickering light. I figured my eyes were playing tricks on me, but as I walked toward the back of the church, I saw the outline of a figure standing just outside the doors to the courtyard. Who in the world would be standing out in the cold staring into an empty sanctuary?

I opened the door and immediately recognized a church member who had suffered a devastating loss earlier that year. His wife suffered her cancer with a quiet dignity, and her death left a huge void for everyone who knew her. I looked at him and recognized the pain, the grief, the deep sense of loss, because on a different level, those were the same emotions I was feeling. I walked over to him and, without saying a word, put my arms around him. We stood there ugly-

crying in the church courtyard on Christmas Eve, both of us grieving the loss of what was supposed to be, grieving the reality of what was. And the light shone on the nativity, and his candle continued to burn, a brave little flicker in the midst of overwhelming darkness.

If you are feeling isolated or alone this Christmas, it's OK. There are people who know what you are going through, and they can not only help you bear your burden, but also find the joy in your situation. If you don't know who they are, talk to me and I'll help you find them. And if you're not feeling isolated or alone this Christmas, I guarantee there are people around you who are. It's so easy to get caught up in the glitz and glitter of this season that you miss the people in the shadows, the people standing outside the door in the darkness, for whom Christmas is not a joyful season. Look for them. Connect with them. Ask them if you can help. Remind them they are not alone.

We are meant to be together, to be connected, to share this crazy life with those around us. There is strength in numbers, but even more than that, there is hope. Mary had to be scared for her future, Elizabeth had to be anxious about such an unorthodox pregnancy, and yet when the women come together, they are filled with the Holy Spirit so much that they can't keep from singing. Coming together at Christmas can often be the balm that soothes the fears and anxieties that this world produces within us.

Our time together in worship, in fellowship, in the listening to and singing of hymns, in prayer, is stable time. When we assemble here, we are reminded that God is once again breaking into our world, showing us that there is more to our existence than what we see and hear. God knows your pain. God knows your struggles. You are not alone if Christmas is less than merry for you. There is no place in our world that is too poor, too remote, too embarrassing, too painful, too messy, that God cannot break into in order to bring out new life. When we come together, hope expands exponentially.

I am very thankful not to have to make that drive from Chicago to Jeffersonville anymore. I'm thankful that my family is now just down the road, and also right here in this sanctuary with me. Each time we come together, we witness to the powerful bond we share through our faith in Christ. It's a busy season, I know. You may be tempted to skip worship or the church dinner or even a Christmas Eve service. Please don't. You need to be here. Because this is stable time. This is where we are reminded that, in spite of all the anxiety and conflict and hatred around us, God still breaks in with good news of great joy. This is where we are reminded of the power of Jesus' name, Emmanuel. When we connect to each other, it's a tangible reminder that God IS with us.