

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Debbie Manning
REJOICE: Joy in Waiting
Luke 1:5-25**

Good morning, everyone. I'm Debbie Manning and I'm part of the Congregational Care team. As you've heard, we're in the beginning of Advent. Over the next four weeks, we will be remembering the story of Jesus' coming in a series we are calling *Rejoice*. We'll be looking in the Book of Luke, the birth narrative of Jesus, and talking about joy. Today I'm kicking off the series with a conversation around Joy in Waiting.

In essence, Advent is about waiting. Joy in the waiting? I have to be honest with you, my knee-jerk reaction is that joy and waiting don't go together. I work in pastoral care and when I think about waiting, to be honest, I think about waiting for test results. Is it cancerous? Has it grown? Is it back? Is it terminal? Waiting! I think of the families who are waiting for loved ones who are fighting wars overseas. I think about couples waiting to get pregnant, people waiting to find their soul mates, people waiting by the phone. I even think about waiting for that garage door to go up when our teenagers are out late at night. When I think about the times in my own life where I have had periods of waiting, these were times of uncertainty and fear and doubt, but at the same time, I experienced faith and hope and even joy. I think that the hardest thing about the waiting is the not knowing, the uncertainty, because we are people who like to know. But in periods of waiting, I think we hold together hope *and* fear. In periods of waiting, I think we hold together uncertainty *and* joy.

My husband and I have been married almost 33 years. We met at University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire and got married in our senior year. Go, Blugolds! One of the things that drew us together was love and commitment to faith and family. We loved that each of us has this huge value around family. Four years into our marriage, we decided it was time to start a family and it never occurred to us that it wouldn't just happen. For three years we waited. We struggled through infertility and the fear that we might never have children. This was a big shift in everything that we had dreamed about. But what I can honestly say is that during that time in my life, I encountered God in a way that was out of the ordinary. I encountered God in a way that truly changed me, changed who I am today. Over and over again during the months and years of waiting, surrounded by friends and family having babies, God met me where I was. I experienced *God with me* and there was joy in that.

I know that this isn't just me. Just this Friday night I was having dinner with two friends who have both been battling stage 4 cancer and their exact words were, both of them, "I am so grateful for the cancer," and "I hate the cancer." For them it was in the waiting for the chemo treatments, the test results, and prognoses that they experienced God in a way that changed who they were. It filled them with a hope and a joy that was greater than their circumstances that transcended all that. It is the experience of *God with us* that we rejoice in.

In the first chapter of the Book of Luke, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth gives us a great picture of joy in waiting. Luke tells believers that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise from long ago. He begins his history of Jesus, preparing us by introducing us to a priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. What we find out is that Zechariah and Elizabeth are a Godly couple, upright in the sight of God. They followed God's Commandments, but they were childless. They had been waiting for years but now were too old to expect to have any children. In that culture in that time, many would have interpreted Elizabeth's barrenness as God's judgment on sin in their lives. But Luke was clear, this couple was faithful to God.

As a priest, Zechariah would come to Jerusalem twice a year when it was his division's turn to perform regular temple liturgy. On this particular occasion, Luke tells us that Zechariah was chosen by lot to actually offer the incense on the altar inside the temple. That was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The incense represented the prayers of the people lifted up to God, prayers that God would fulfill the promise He had made to Abraham years ago. But the unexpected happens—we will pick up the story in Luke 1:11-25.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. **13** But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. **14** He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, **15** for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. **16** Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. **17** And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." **19** The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. **20** And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." **21** Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. **22** When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. **23** When his time of service was completed, he returned home. **24** After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. **25** "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

So this angel appears to Zechariah and he says, "Your prayer has been heard!" As you can imagine, Zechariah was stunned. He didn't know quite what to say. Because of his doubt and disbelief, the angel declared that Zechariah would be silent and would not be able to speak until this prophecy concerning the birth of their son, John the Baptist, was fulfilled.

More waiting, this time in silence. This was a couple that had done a lot of waiting. They had waited with the rest of Israel for hundreds of years for the promised Messiah. They had waited for decades for a baby. Now Elizabeth would wait for nine months to hold that baby, and for nine

months Zechariah would wait in silence. I imagine that they waited with some uncertainty and some fear. They were elderly. “Will this actually happen? Will the baby be okay? Will I ever speak again?” At the same time, they must have been filled with incredible joy. Can you even imagine the joy, the anticipation that at last they would have a child, a special child, with a special purpose? On top of that, these two knew that something bigger was going on. They knew that God’s covenant with Israel was about to be fulfilled. They understood *God with us*.

But what is it that we can take away, that we can learn from Elizabeth and Zechariah? How do we experience joy in the waiting? I think there are two questions that we need to ask ourselves. The first question is this, **what do we do in the waiting? We need to lean into God.** Elizabeth and Zechariah were a faithful couple who leaned into God during these times of waiting. The more vulnerable we are, when we trust God and lay it all out there for Him, we encounter Him in life-changing ways. They did this. We need to clear away anything that stands between us and God. That means looking deep within ourselves, and asking ourselves and answering honestly the question, am I living the life that God has called me to live? Are our hearts truly at home in the lives we are living? Elizabeth and Zechariah were upright in the sight of God. Likewise, we need to ask ourselves, are we following God’s Commandments with all of our hearts?

The second question that I think might be even more important is, **who are we in the waiting? We are His.** I am His. Knowing whose we are in the waiting can be life-saving. No matter what our circumstances are, understanding at a heart level that we are children of God will bring joy in the waiting. Elizabeth and Zechariah understood that. They knew whose they were. Brene Brown is the author of a book I’ve been reading, *Daring Greatly*. She calls people who believe in their own worthiness *wholehearted*. She says wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. For us, our worthiness comes from one place, understanding whose we are. In the list of guideposts for wholehearted living, Brene includes:

- Cultivating gratitude and joy, letting go of scarcity and fear of the dark
- Cultivating intuition and trusting faith, letting go of the need for certainty

When we have the courage to live wholeheartedly, what we do becomes a part of what God is doing, part of something that will change the world. God is at work in the world and He will use our lives to bring new life into the world. Psalm 27:14 says this:

14 Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

Waiting for God takes courage, but it is life-changing. It is joy bringing. Back to Zechariah. For nine months, he had a chance to reflect on Gabriel’s message, and he was changed. As John was being formed in Elizabeth’s womb, a new heart was being formed in Zechariah because he experienced *God with him*. When John was born, family and friends assumed that Zechariah would name his son a family name, but Zechariah called for a tablet. As instructed by Gabriel, he wrote, “His name is John.” Immediately he could speak, and he began praising God. Filled with the Holy Spirit, this is what Zechariah prophesied. From Luke 1:68-75,

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. **69** He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David **70** (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), **71** salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— **72** to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, **73** the oath he swore to our father Abraham: **74** to

rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear **75** in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

This was big! Not only was Zechariah's silence broken, but for the people of Israel, God's silence was broken. Here is the significance. This was the first time in 450 years that the people of Israel heard a public, prophetic witness. The last prophet who showed up in the Old Testament was Malachi. Israel had been laboring under this silence, wondering if God had forgotten them. The first words in 450 years were a promise.

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

Can you imagine how they felt when they heard those words? God is alive and well. He is here in the midst of waiting and in that, we experience joy. This is called Zechariah's Song, spoken by a man who had lived through years of waiting. As he looks into the eyes of his baby son whom he has prayed for and longed for for years, he knows that something big is about to happen. What Zechariah knew was that the promised Savior was coming to redeem His people.

God was doing what He had promised centuries ago to Abraham. He had promised to send a new David and had spoken of a prophet who would come and prepare the way. Through the long years of waiting and hoping and hurting, a simple priest and his wife are called to trust God, to lean into God at this moment in this period of time. While this story is a story of hopes and fears and longings of ordinary people just like you and me, the bigger story is the story of our God coming to redeem us, to be *with us*. As seen in Luke's story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, God has not forgotten us. God is with us now in this very moment and He promises to be with us always.

When I think of *God with us*, I think of the Candlelight Memorial Service, one of the holiest nights in the church for me. On a Tuesday during Advent, several hundred of us will sit together in this candlelit space to sing and listen and pray and remember. We hold together the grief of remembering our loved ones who have died and the hope and joy in the coming Messiah. That's what makes it so holy.

Through the years, I've come to know many of the stories. We've come to know each other's stories. I know that I'll see the family and friends of a young man who died 20 years ago at the age of 27 because they come every year. There are about a dozen of them who will meet at the service and then head over to the Convention Grill to have dinner because their son and brother and friend loved the Convention Grill.

I know I'll see the young widow who lost her husband this last August just a few days shy of their one-year wedding anniversary. Maybe a couple that I know will be there to honor their baby son who died last June at two days old. Dozens of people who have lost the spouses and parents they have spent a lifetime with will come to remember. There will be parents and siblings and children who are grieving the loss of a loved one they didn't get enough time with, who died too young, too soon.

The view from the back of the room is amazing. The stage is lit with hundreds of candles people have lit in memory of their loved ones. The tree is hung with hundreds of ornaments. As you see the families gathered at the steps, holding one another in prayer, there is one thing and one

thing only that we are all certain of. We are certain that *God is with us*. A night that could have simply been about grief and loss becomes a night of rejoicing. We rejoice in the waiting of the coming Messiah. Just as He promised, He will come. That's worth waiting for!

[Video with singing.]

The sun will rise
The sun will rise, bringing life to the earth as it springs from the ground.
The sun will rise.
The sun will rise as you dry all your tears. Lay your burden down.
Won't you dry all your tears. Lay your burden down.

The sun will rise.
The sun will rise, bringing new life to the earth as it springs from the ground.
The sun will rise.
The sun will rise. Won't you dry all your tears. Lay your burden down.
Won't you dry all your tears. Lay your burden down.

Won't you dry all your tears. Lay your burden down.

He will come! Advent also reminds us that although the waiting is done on our end, the appearing is on His end. Many of us are waiting on God in different areas of our lives. Advent reminds us that He has a history of appearing. He appeared in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, and He appears in our lives now. Oh, come, oh, come, *Emmanuel*. He is *Emmanuel*, *God with us*. He has come and He is here, with you, with me, and no matter what we are waiting on, He will surely come and deliver the need. In the meantime, we wait in peace because peace is not the absence of trouble but rather the presence of God. We wait in faith and in joyful expectation of Him. Let's pray.

Holy God, we are filled with gratefulness and joy because You are a God who loves us enough to send Your Son to earth as a baby to teach us about who You are and how we are to live. God, I just pray that not only during the days of Advent but in all of our days, we can lean into You. We can remember who we are, whose we are, and we can wait, God, with joy. In Your precious and holy Name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.