

SUNDAY, December 15 2024 Surprised by Joy?

Isaiah 12:2-6 Luke 1:39-55

What are we looking for in life? Having our basic needs of food, water, clothing and shelter met, yes? But what else? What is it that calls us to do and to expend energy that we would not normally do? We search for something- and as a Christian church this something is really Some one- God in three persons- blessed Trinity. But how do we share God and why we look for God? Why are we needing God? Or do we?

These are tough questions yet in a recent novel I listened to called "The Christmas Town" by Donna VanLiere a young woman was looking for something more in her life. She lived in a community and worked in a store. She shared an apartment with her friend but they didn't get along well, nor had common interests other than sharing rent. One day this girl finds herself in another community and witnesses a car accident. As such she is called to the police station and fill out forms. But it is while she walks around the town she experiences something that she cannot define. She goes into a grocery store and notices that of the two check- out lines one line is much longer than the other. And even when the second line is free no one wants to move over.

She asks one of the ladies in line-- why? Well we all want our note from Ben. Ben is the grocery packer where the line is long. And for a while now he puts into each bag a note which he has written himself often staying up late the night before for the many customers who have known him his whole life. Ben's notes are the reason why this young woman decides to stay in his check- out line to find out for herself. Having purchased a snack and bottle of water, the items are bagged and of course a note is placed in it. This note is beginning point of the change in this young woman's life. The note simply said, "Cheer up! There are good things happening to you today-- You made a new friend in me! The note is signed 'Ben'. The novel continues as the young woman is intrigued by what this stranger wrote and it is not just Ben but the community who reaches out to her and brings her something she has not experienced in her life-- she is surprised by joy!

Joy we want it, along with comfort and strength to carry on in those moments when nothing seems to work, or falls apart, or there is anger, a threat of change and uncertainty, or even when there is loss of power and the need to be forgiven.

The prophet Isaiah 12 tells us that there will come a day when God is our strength and might and is our salvation. Even though there are moments when God gets angry at our behaviours, there comes a moment when God embraces us again and comforting us as we need more than before. And what will we experience from the wells of salvation? Joy! And we will sing

for Joy because in our midst is the Holy One of Israel. Who is this Holy One of Israel? God who loved the world who sent Jesus to save us! Isaiah's prophecy many hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Yet he was inspired by God to write these words!

When have you been joy filled lately? Not just when you've had great tasting jelly filled donut-- but truly filled with joy? Have you ever been surprised by joy? That is something unexpected occurred and all other emotions dropped enabling true joy to emerge!

Our reading from Luke 1 is the story of an extended "girls night" when Mary travels with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. News had travelled quick enough through the village that Mary needed to leave for a while and see her older cousin. After all she was a young woman engaged to be married and now she was pregnant.

Elizabeth was pregnant as well but she was much older than Mary and had been married to Zechariah the priest for many years. They had given up having children but as we know God changed things and Elizabeth was overjoyed! When Elizabeth hears Mary- "Elizabeth are you home?" The baby within her 'leaped in her womb" and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. And it is Elizabeth who shouts and exclaims out loud- "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb"! The text then states, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." Elizabeth was taken by surprise by the activity of the baby she carried but she was surprised also by joy.

This story of Elizabeth and Mary's visit has been studied for years asking the question why or how did the baby of Elizabeth leap within? Did the baby she carry know about Mary's baby even in utero? Did the baby know he was to prepare the way of the Lord? We don't know for sure but there was truly a bond between him and Mary. And later on we do know of the bond that exists between John and Jesus.

Mary sings with joy and excitement for she is coming to realize that the baby she carries and will birth is the One whom God said will save His people. She sings by saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour." It is not only with her voice she sings- - but from way down inside her, she sings and rejoices. This is the reason she is with Elizabeth to realize that the baby she carries is the Messiah. Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months and then returns home. She is not there when John is born but the community around them support her in this new way of life at this older age. For she is the mother of the 'voice in the wilderness' John who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus.

The two women share a bond- they are pregnant by God's Spirit- one to give birth at an older age and he would prepare people for the Messiah. The Messiah is within Mary for she found favour in God's eyes and she is faithful in serving God. She sings and praises God for his mercy, strength, fairness in power, how he fed the hungry and helped his people in mercy and offered the promise of hope in One who was to come. The baby she carried.

Was she surprised by joy? Yes. For when she is first told about bearing the Son of God, her response was "how can this be?" and now she experiences the enormous task set before her. But she is willing because God has done great things for her and so she praises God all the more. She is filled with joy and sees a different future for her life even in these early days of pregnancy. She and Elizabeth have been blessed, but are also filled with surprise and wonder because they have the joy of the Lord which guides them.

As we consider what is happening in our world right now, wouldn't a little joy make a difference? Tensions rising over political threats, battles in war zones continue and basic needs for people being divided over money and power. But what is joy?

Happiness vs Joy is there despite circumstances, focused on God's kingdom, and comes from a place of gratitude, praise and confidence.. It is a state of being. It comes from a heavenly perspective and is full of hope. This is why Elizabeth and Mary are surprised by joy-- they were just regular women in a small community chosen by God to carry and birth the one who would prepare the people for the Messiah and the Promised one of God.

As we continue our Advent journey to the stable and manger, we each need to look for those unexpected moments of joy. When you are recognized for something you did in the past and it was good. For when you lifted up another person who was feeling sad and uncertain and showed the joy of Jesus. Or even when you grew angry and prayed and looked inside for the joy that Jesus gives and you are forgiven. This is the joy and how we can be surprised. For a surprise is just that- an unexpected gift and when we are surprised by joy-- we believe God has a role in it!

Let us give thanks and praise God for the gift of Jesus to the world! Grace and mercy God we praise you and thank for your promise of the Messiah to come. Joy to the world help us to see Him the answer to all our hopes and fears. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.