

**Pilgrim Church of Duxbury
December 4, 2016
Rev. Peggy O'Connor
Luke 1:5-23
Joy to Come**

We are starting a new sermon series today and it is, at the suggestion of the deacons, on Joy. What could be more appropriate in this season?

Joy...Who doesn't want to have a joy filled life? And yet, as we all know, joy can be elusive and, at times, even seem to be totally lacking. Where does it go in such times? How can we get it back? How can we hang onto it when we feel it? These are questions we have all asked. Happily, our passage from Luke, offers us some excellent answers.

Zechariah was a priest at the Jerusalem temple; a position of high honor. Born into a family of priests that traced its lineage back to Aaron, brother of Moses, he was destined to become a priest himself. When it came time to marry, he looked for a woman of deep faith and found her in Elizabeth, whose father, like his own, was a priest and descendant of Aaron.

In due time Zechariah took his place in the Jerusalem Temple, which at the time is said to have had 20,000 priests. Daily the priests were chosen by lot to lead various worship duties, the highest of which was the burning of incense. It was such an honor because it was when the prayers of the people were offered, including those of the priest. It was the moment when all the hopes of those gathered were joined into one great intercession. It was an honor that probably fell to a priest just once in their lifetime, if at all.

Zechariah's chance came when he was old. But he was ready. He walked into that holy space, spread incense on a bed of hot coals and began praying. As the smoke and his prayers rose to God, an angel appeared saying: "Your prayers have been answered. Your wife will have a son who will be a great prophet, filled with the power and spirit of Elijah. His words will attract people, changing their hearts and bringing them back to God."

Such good news! Zechariah should have been filled with Joy! But he wasn't. He heard the news but could not comprehend it. This man of faith sputtered in shock asking the angel, "How can this be...my wife and I are very old?" Gabriel, annoyed, replies..."I was commanded by God to bring you this message. It will happen BUT because you doubted you will be struck dumb until the birth of this child." This story is dramatic and memorable. But what does it mean? Does it say anything about joy?

In the first place this story tells us that our ability to experience joy depends on more than just good news. Clearly the news that the angel delivered was better than anything Zechariah and Elizabeth had imagined. To bear a child was all they had asked. That she would bear a son and that he would be a great prophet, should have filled Zechariah with such pride and joy that he would have barely been able to complete his duties. But instead he pushed the news away and argued that it could not be.

Why would he do that? Why not jump with joy? I believe he could not let the news in because he had given up hope. Like many of us, he and

Elizabeth were rational people. After having their hopes dashed, month after month, year after year, for decades, they had slowly but surely accepted reality of their situation. No sense in hoping for the impossible.

This makes sense but it has a major flaw...it leaves God out of the equation. And when we leave God out of things we close the door, lock it, and throw away the key that opens us to joy. And the key is hope. Hope keeps us open to possibilities that seem impossible. It tells us all that God is still at work in our lives.

I imagine that as the decades passed and no children were conceived, the hard disappointment of their sadness settled in and hardened within their hearts. In the process hope died. They had given up hope for a child and in the process they had given up on God.

Before we judge them too harshly, let's look at our own histories with hard disappointments. Some of life's disappointments seem to take everything we have. At the same time they also overburden us with more than we can handle. Such disappointments leave us depleted and unable to cope with what we have. Something has to go...and hope is eventually lost.

This only makes sense if there is no God. But, faith says, With God All Things are Possible. If we believe this then giving up hope makes no sense. Which brings us to my second point: **It is never too bleak or too late for God to enter into our lives and turn things around.** Joy is always just

around the corner...if we have the eyes to see it. But it all hinges on the Advent gift of HOPE.

Hope is like an ember which, when carried faithfully within, can and will ignite joy when it comes to us. But all too often we confuse Joy with happiness. But they are totally different things. Happiness comes from external things. We watch our children or grandchildren play...we hear them laughing and we are happy. Joy is an internal thing. It comes when we see the hand of God in our lives. It is not the temporary excitement of winning the lottery. Rather joy ignites within when the inexplicable thing that changes everything happens. Perhaps it comes when you have lost your job and have to move and it seems all is lost. Up in the attic you are overwhelmed by the boxes of stuff, some still there from when you moved into that house. You just want to throw it all away. Why bother taking anything. You move a few boxes around and one box falls and breaks open, spilling its contents. It is the last straw. You start picking things up and flinging them back into the broken box. Then you realize these are things you saved from your childhood and you see the box you kept your treasures in. You sit down and open it. There are a few things you barely remember and then, wrapped in a piece of cloth, you find the lucky nickel your grandfather gave you when you were five. You sit there crying and laughing and hope ignites a sense of joy...a light in the darkness...a knowledge that somehow...impossible as it

seemed a moment ago...all is not lost. It is never too bleak or too late for God to enter into our lives with joy.

Lastly, the really good news is that although we may give up on God...God never gives up on us...for we are God's pride and joy. And this is the true source of joy in our lives. It isn't our joy...it is God's. And God spreads it throughout our lives in little moments and sometimes in big ones. What are the joys of life? Love...over which we have no control...we cannot even explain how or why it happens or doesn't happen. New life...over which we have little control...as this morning's story tells us. Friendship... something we cannot make happen. Sunsets...the ocean or a lake, river or a stream...the mountains...the desert...the first snow...a summer shower...a rainbow. Joy comes to us most often in things we do not control...things that are free...that are simple even. But we cannot see or experience these joys without the hope that faith gives. When we have the hope of faith...in the darkest hour we can find joy.

In 1861, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's wife died in a fire; the Civil War broke out; and his son enlisted. Two years later he learned his son had been seriously wounded. All seemed lost to Longfellow. Christmas Day, sitting at his desk, he heard church bells in his town ringing and he wrote this poem:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play.
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth,
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is not peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep.
"God is not dead, nor doth he sleep!
The wrong shall fail,
The right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men!"

In the darkest years of his life, Longfellow listened to church bells on a Christmas morning and they rekindled his ember of hope. And though the canons of war threatened to extinguish it, the bells rang out again and ember of hope kindled a kind of joy. It was and is the joy of knowing that

God is ever present...never forsaking us. This is the joy of Christmas...which Advent asks us to take in and make our own...in faith...with hope.