

Lesson Luke 1: 57-80

Sermon: Joy to the World

In the church Advent is known as a time of waiting. Waiting to celebrate what we know as the birth of Christ. Waiting to celebrate Christmas. And part of that symbolism of waiting is the Advent wreath. Where we progressively light a candle each week, drawing closer to Christmas. But do you know why there is a pink candle? And why is it lit on the 3rd Sunday of Advent?

Worship in the ancient church was an event-oriented gathering, an experience to fully appreciate what God in Christ offers. And the church year was divided into two main holy days. Through Epiphany, it was the incarnation of Jesus that was celebrated, and through Easter, his life, death, and resurrection. On those holy days, new members were baptized and welcomed into the church family. And so the weeks leading up to those days were weeks of preparing oneself through repentance, that is turning toward God, to be transformed by Christ's righteousness, culminated in membership to the local church. The church family itself would also use that time prepare their hearts and lives to renew their own membership. If you notice in a membership reception even today, whereas the church commits to support the walk of faith for the new members, they also reaffirm their commitment as disciples too. So each week in Advent, each week in Lent, we are called to focus on aspects of setting our hearts right again with God. For Advent, we do so through the symbolism of the advent wreath, and the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love.

But why is joy a pink candle? Because Christians are a people of joy, even in the midst of waiting, we know there is joy to be had as we prepare our hearts for the birth of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ during Lent. So while the other weeks of Advent and Lent are weeks reminding us to turn to God through Christ, the fourth week of Lent, and the 3rd week of Advent, were adopted as joyful Sundays. Because even in the midst of longing, waiting, and repentance, there is always joy in Christ. And so tradition was during those specific weeks of the church calendar, the colors of the church turned from purple/blue to pink/rose. And so in the times of waiting, joy was celebrated.

If we read Luke's story, we will recognize that the very first Christmas was a time of waiting. It was a time and age when Israel had been waiting for what they knew could make things right for them. Waiting for what they knew could be good. They were waiting for the Messiah, to come and save them. A Messiah promised to them, from the line of David, some 900 years prior. This is what God said to David. *2 Samuel 7:12-16* ¹²*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.* ¹³*He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.* ¹⁴*I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.* ...¹⁶*Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.* These are the words the Israelites hung onto through the downfall of Israel and Judah. Through the oppression of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Romans. And so they waited. Waited for God's word to come and be. Yet the waiting was getting old. And sometimes when we get tired of waiting, we lose faith, don't we?

Luke parallels this idea with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. A married couple who wanted to have a family. Dreamed of having family, as after all it was their duty as Israelites to continue the lineage of God's people. But as they were getting older, it appeared a child would not be born to them. Yet Luke will show us *with God, it's never too late for anything. And waiting can bring joy.*

Last week, I briefly spoke about their story. How Elizabeth is Mary's cousin, and she is married to Zechariah who was a priest and one day in his duties to pray, he was greeted by the angel Gabriel announces he and Elizabeth will give birth to a son, named John, who would prepare the way for the Lord. However Zechariah was stunned and asks, *'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.'* ¹⁹*The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.* ²⁰*But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'* Zechariah's faith had been shaken, and because of his questioning, Gabriel chose to silence him, so Zechariah could watch and wait.

Friends, there are times, when we lose our patience, and I'm not just talking about getting through events like Christmas, or the checkout line in the stores. I'm talking about those times when we say, "Ok God, when is this going to happen? When is this going to change? When will you reveal your will to make things right?" I'm talking about the times when our waiting leads to a question of faith in God. We have those moments, those times. Sometimes it's personal, sometimes it's communal, or concerns regarding the world. However, today's texts come to us and teach us that waiting is a part of our discipleship. We must learn to be

patient and in so doing, watch for God's righteousness unfold, then when we do see it, be sure to be the voice that calls out praises for God's fulfillment.

In our lessons, Zechariah watched, and he saw how everything began to unfold according to Gabriel's word and according to the Scripture, which Zechariah would have known by heart. Zechariah would see Mary with child, along with Elizabeth, and I'm sure his heart was growing strangely warm with what surrounded him because as he saw everything unfold, he saw his faith restored, of God's promises being revealed, which allowed joy to be poured in his heart, a joy he would be able to express not only for himself but for the world. Hear these words he shares when John is born and he can speak once again, ⁶⁸ *'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.'* ⁶⁹ *'He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David...'* ⁷¹ *'that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.'* ⁷⁶ *'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,'* ⁷⁷ *'to give knowledge of salvation to his people...'* ⁷⁹ *'to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'* Do you hear the joy? The joy that replaced his doubt, his questioning, his impatience? Do you hear the joy that is expressed because God has come to set things straight, and to make things right. And this joy is for the world. So, he expressed God's faithfulness for all to hear.

In his book, *Joy for the World: How Christianity Lost Its Cultural Influence and Can Begin Rebuilding It* by Greg Forster, he tells the story of how he did not grow up attending church except for on Christmas Eves. And as he got older and was searching for a spiritual development he remembered the wonderful feelings he experienced at those services from the scriptures, to candles, to ending with Joy to the World. And so he decided to research the history to Joy to the World. Turns out the well-known carol was not written for Christmas. The author was Isaac Watts, who in the early 1700s was known to be a famous hymn writer and poet. In 1719, Watts published a book of poems in which each poem was based on a psalm. But rather than just translate the original Old Testament texts, he adjusted them to refer more clearly to the work of Jesus revealed in the New Testament. One of those poems was an adaptation of Psalm 98. ¹ *'O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things...'* ³ *'He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.'* ⁴ *'Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises...He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.'*

Forester claims that Watts laid out the flow of God's joy for us in that psalm, revealed in Jesus. Verse 1: Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room. And heaven and nature and sing. In this verse, Watts claims the Holy Spirit is at work through the church and our relationship with Jesus, to honor and praise God with open hearts and song. Verse 2: Joy to the world, the Savior reigns. Let all their songs employ. While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy. This verse carries on the thought that because God made human beings as social creatures, this joy of God is not locked up in an isolated heart; it flows among us and transforms how we relate to one another and creation as a whole. Verse 3: No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings flow. In verse 3, Watts points out that we live most of our lives out in the world, among people who are not yet transformed in this special way. Therefore, how we live in the world should reveal the change the Spirit is working in us, carrying the impact of the joy of God "far as the curse is found." Verse 4: He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love. And to close the poem, Watts writes that we work with Christ to make the world more like it should be, experiencing God's righteousness and love. In 1836 an American composer by the name of Lowell Mason of Boston, put this poem and its meaning to the music we know and love today. A song that that we share in worship. A song that honestly could be sung all year round, a song of great joy. ¹ Forester claims the church should be singing and living this joy every today to bring back a positive influence in this world.

Friends, Advent is a time of waiting. It is a time when we prepare our hearts to receive the gift of the Christ child, God among us. And while waiting can be a struggle at times, may we remember the story of

¹ This article is adapted from [Joy for the World: How Christianity Lost Its Cultural Influence and Can Begin Rebuilding It](https://www.crossway.org/articles/a-brief-history-of-joy-to-the-world/) by Greg Forster. <https://www.crossway.org/articles/a-brief-history-of-joy-to-the-world/> 12/7/20

Zechariah, who saw everything unfold, which lead to his faith being restored, and allowed joy to be poured in his heart, a joy he would be able to express not only for himself but for the world.

As you continue to wait this season for the birth of the Christ child, may his birth help you exude joy, that gives faith to your doubt and impatience, and fills your heart with wonders of God's love. So that joy can bless and redeem the world.

Let's pray: Loving God, as we continue in this Advent season, we open all the dark places in our lives to the healing light of Christ to experience Christmas. Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you that our mouths may be filled with laughter and our lives shine the light of your joyous promises fulfilled Amen.