

Have you ever given or received a puppy for Christmas? You've seen it on the TV commercials for sure. A super-cute, tiny, cuddly fuzz ball is usually wearing a bright red bow around its neck. It usually either comes bounding around the corner or peeks its head out of a box as soon as the kids or special someone lifts the loosely fitting lid. It's always adorable, and it starts giving kisses or tumbling out over its clumsy, oversized paws.

You can probably feel the warm fuzzies even now as we talk about it, right?

So if you've ever actually been involved in one of these Christmas-morning puppy gifts, you know what it's like to try to put a puppy in a box. That little bundle of love and joy—we won't mention the dog hair and, um, accidents—just does not want to be contained inside a box. You certainly can't wrap him up the week before and stick his box under the Christmas tree. You have to work to keep him hidden—probably somewhere outside the house. Then you have to wait until exactly one minute before the kids come down the stairs to drop that doggie into the box and probably bribe him with a treat or a toy that just might occupy him for 38.6 seconds, so you can pop on the lid and rush him into the hands of his new best friend. Some people just skip the box altogether, hide out in the next room, then put the puppy on the floor and let him come bounding into the room to the accompaniment of squeals of delight.

You see, a dog is just uncontainable in a cardboard box. It comes spilling out to love and lick everyone that's around. And it doesn't stop there. The people who receive a puppy for Christmas just can't keep it to themselves. They pass that little pup around to everyone in the house, and they don't stop there. They carry it or lead it around to the neighbours. They drive with it to the relatives or friends—or to the shop or salon or dentist. (OK, maybe not the dentist.) But they want to show and share this adorable little ball of fur with everyone they can. And then those people want to go grab their kids, husband, girlfriend, or whomever to share the cuteness and happiness that this little puppy exudes.

Joy is a lot like puppies. Fortunately, it's not as hairy and doesn't make a mess, but joy is boundless and uncontainable. Joy overflows, and when you've experienced joy, you want to share it with someone else—or as many people as you can. Joy bubbles over and touches everyone it comes in contact with.

Joy is what we are celebrating on this third Sunday of Advent.

If you've been journeying with us the past two weeks toward Christmas, you know that we have been celebrating Advent. As a quick recap, the word *advent* means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing. Advent is not just an extension of Christmas—it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming. Advent looks back in celebration at the hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ's coming, while at the same time looking forward in hopeful and eager anticipation to the coming of Christ's kingdom when He returns for His people. During Advent we wait for both—it's an active, assured, and hopeful waiting. And each week, we focus on a different attribute of God represented in the coming of Jesus: hope, love, joy, and peace. Because Jesus is Immanuel, “God with Us,” He is the embodiment of these traits, who has entered our world and who fills us with them all.

### **Elizabeth: Joy Overcomes Shame**

If you were here with us on the first Sunday of Advent, you remember we talked about Zechariah. Luke 1 tells the story of Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. They were the

parents of John the Baptist, who was sent to prepare the way for Jesus, the Messiah. Zechariah was a priest who received a visit from an angel that told 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. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”* (Luke 1:13–15)

The catch was that Zechariah and Elizabeth were old. Elizabeth was beyond childbearing years, and the couple had never been able to have kids. So besides the shock from talking to an angel, Zechariah couldn't get over the fact that it was possible for his wife to have a baby. And as a result, his voice was taken away until the baby was born.

But today, let's look a little closer at Elizabeth, because in the story of God with Us, she deeply experienced joy in the midst of the miraculous events she found herself suddenly in the middle of.

To understand Elizabeth's joy, however, we have to understand a little bit about her pain. You see, for the ancient Jews, children were a tremendous blessing. Psalm 127:3-5 tells us, *“Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court.”* Children allowed a family to pass on its name and heritage. They provided more hands to handle the daily tasks of life or to expand their ability to forge a livelihood through their trade or craft. Most importantly, children were viewed as a gift from God and a sign of God's favor.

To be childless, then, was a source of great frustration, sorrow, and shame. And Elizabeth would have known this despair for years. She most likely would have married Zechariah when she was a young teenager, and the couple would have hoped right away to have children. Elizabeth probably would have imagined what it would be like to have a home filled with kids. She would have dreamed of holding her own babies. She might have made lists of names in her mind, drawing from the family names that would be passed traditionally down the family lines.

At first, Elizabeth might have dismissed the lack of a pregnancy. Maybe the timing just wasn't right to conceive. Family and friends would have been supportive, at least in the beginning. They might have offered advice that while well intentioned was just plain hurtful: “Maybe there is some sin in your life you need to confess,” they might have said. “When we tried this, it helped us get pregnant. Maybe something's just wrong with you.”

Who knows how long it took, but gradually, year after year, Elizabeth's hope would have slowly died as she came to terms with the fact that something was wrong, that she could not have a child. At some point, the social stigma would have stuck. “Barren,” they called her. It became a shameful and permanent mark. Elizabeth would have grieved over the loss of ever being a mother. She would have accepted the loss of the status that came in her culture from bearing children. She would never be considered as worthy or esteemed as other women. She accepted her fate as a failure in the eyes of her society.

Still, Elizabeth must have known some happiness as well and would have been deeply involved in community life, especially since Zechariah was a priest. And though she carried her emotional burden beneath the surface, she and Zechariah remained faithful to God. Luke described them like this: *“Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the*

*Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly.*" (Luke 1:6). This is how they planned to live out the rest of their old age, serving God and the people around them.

And then God came.

On an ordinary day with Zechariah at work in the temple, the angel Gabriel showed up out of the blue with that miraculous message. Zechariah couldn't even tell his wife what the angel had said. He would have had to either write it out, if Elizabeth could read, or use signs and gestures to give his wife the news.

Elizabeth must have thought she was getting the wrong message at first. It seemed too good to be true! Hope must have kicked in her heart like the thump of a baby in the womb. Could she even allow herself to go there? Could she open her heart to the possibility after hoping and waiting and praying for so long, only to be let down again and again and again?

From what we can tell from Luke's account, it seems Elizabeth had an easier time of accepting the miraculous news than her husband. And soon she was pregnant, saying, "*The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people*" (Luke 1:25).

What's curious is that Luke also told us that Elizabeth spent the first five months of her pregnancy in seclusion. There's no way for us to know exactly why. But maybe she knew no one would believe her news until she was definitely showing. Or maybe she had been here before and was afraid this pregnancy might be lost like earlier ones—maybe she couldn't bear going through that loss and shame publicly again. Maybe this was her way of sharing her husband's silence as they lived daily through a miracle unfolding before their eyes—and literally inside Elizabeth's body.

What we do know is that in her sixth month of pregnancy, Elizabeth experienced a deep encounter with joy brought by the coming Messiah, whose human life had just sprung into being in Mary's womb. As we discussed last week, young Mary left her home shortly after her own angelic visit and came to stay with her cousin Elizabeth for three months. As soon as she arrived, Elizabeth's baby "*leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit*" (Luke 1:41).

With a sudden end to her silence and seclusion, Elizabeth's joy overflowed, and she greeted Mary with a beautiful and insightful blessing: "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!*" (Luke 1:42–45).

The puppy was out of the box now. Joy was flowing. And true to its nature, joy was contagious.

Mary burst into her own song of praise and thanksgiving as she gave words to the miracle happening through her. And finally, she was understood and believed and affirmed. Without Mary even having to explain, Elizabeth knew and gave voice to exactly what was going on. Maybe God had revealed this to her earlier. Maybe God opened her eyes on the spot as her own miracle son, John, recognized the miracle Son of God, Jesus, within Mary. But more than anyone else in the world was able to, these two women understood each other and shared a joy that could no longer be contained, no matter how difficult the circumstances they were coming out of and still facing ahead.

Already Immanuel, God with Us, was unleashing joy on earth.

And already His joy began rippling outward. When Elizabeth gave birth to John three months later, the joy of her miracle spread through her village and family. “*Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.*” (Luke 1:57).

Perhaps there is no joy greater than that of a mother holding her newborn child. For Elizabeth, the joy must have been especially overwhelming. She was experiencing a miracle, and it was a miracle that healed a lifetime of hurt, pain, disrespect, and shame. And it was only the beginning of the miracles she would witness in her lifetime.

### **Our Source of Joy**

What would you and I give to know such joy? To see the scars and shame of our life washed away so dramatically?

Most likely we won’t see it happen through such an obvious miracle, but the joy Elizabeth experienced is available to us. This is the joy brought into our world by Jesus, God with Us. And though we are living long past His time on earth, His life and His joy are available to us now.

The apostle Peter wrote, “*Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*” (1 Peter 1:8–9)

An inexpressible and glorious joy. That’s deep stuff.

This is stuff that runs much deeper than happiness. We love to be happy. We love to feel good. But happiness comes and goes as the circumstances around us change by the hour and the minute. Happiness can come from many things: Birthday parties and balloons. Your favourite song on a perfect summer day. An encouraging message from a friend. Winning the big game. A delicious meal. These are good and enjoyable things to be savoured and enjoyed for sure—but all are fleeting.

And pursuing happiness for the sake of happiness can be a shallow, self-centred pursuit. “It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness,” wrote Viktor Frankl, the famous Jewish survivor of World War II Nazi concentration camps who wrote the book *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

Joy includes happiness, but it runs much deeper. Joy permeates our souls. In our lives, the stuff of joy looks like the birth of your child. Your wedding day. Being declared free of cancer for good. Your loved one coming out of a coma with no brain damage.

Joy is rooted in gratitude, meaning, and hope fulfilled, especially when it is based in relationship with our Creator. Joy comes from God with Us—Jesus is the source of our joy. Peter called it “an inexpressible and glorious joy” that is part of the inheritance we are receiving in Christ. With His life and the promise of eternal life beyond this world, we find the deep kind of joy that fills us no matter the pain that we still face on this earth.

As Jesus explained to His disciples about His coming death and resurrection, “*So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.*” (John 16:22).

As we turn our eyes expectantly to Jesus in this Advent season, and as we walk with Him beyond toward the day when He will come again and fulfil His healing work, we can experience His joy in the process. And we can know with confidence that an even greater, unending joy awaits us one day. One day we will receive it in full. Yet even now, we find

hope and joy in what Jesus has done and what we know He will faithfully do in the future. And like Nehemiah of the Old Testament, the Jewish leader who faced great odds in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, we can experience the truth that “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

### **Joy Defies Our Circumstances**

We compared happiness and joy a little bit ago, but if there’s one defining characteristic of joy that I hope you take away from our time together today, it is this: Joy defies our circumstances.

Happiness comes and goes with positive events or experiences. Joy flows deep even in the face of challenge, hardship, or suffering. Joy drawn from Jesus, God with Us, sees the big picture beyond the immediate pain.

James famously said it best right at the beginning of his eponymous book of the Bible: “*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*” (James 1:2–4)

Joy understands that there is more than meets the eye. That God is at work always, even in the tough stuff of life. And that eventually God will make everything right and healed and whole, including us. Because of that, we can experience joy in the here and now, no matter how bad the here and now looks and feels.

Sure, there’s a process involved, and that’s part of the point. As we continue to practice opening our hearts to God’s Spirit, immersing ourselves in His Word, and aligning our thinking and perspectives to His ways, we experience His Spirit working within us, bringing us clarity, understanding, and strength to trust and see and act in the joy He provides.

What are the circumstances you are facing right now as we journey toward Christmas? What are the situations that are stealing your joy? Or the hurts where pain seems to overrule?

I don’t mean to make light of what you are going through, because I know the pain is real for us all. But can I encourage you to take a look from another angle? Can I encourage you to ask God to give you another view—to show you His big picture?

You may not experience a miracle as clear as Elizabeth’s, but in Advent and in Christmas there is a miracle for us all: the miracle of God come to earth to be with us, to heal us, to forgive us, to redeem and restore all our pain, to turn it into good. This is a cause for joy even in our darkest days.

This was the message of the angel long ago announcing the arrival of Christ to the terrified shepherds outside of Bethlehem: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:9–10). Jesus, come to be God with Us, has brought us joy—no matter what we are facing.

### **Joy Is a Choice**

Before we close today, I’d like to look at one more aspect of joy that we can apply as we continue our Advent observance. That is the fact that joy can be a choice, and joy can be an action.

We’ve talked about Mary in previous weeks, and we talked about her today as she spent time with Elizabeth. Remember when Mary showed up at Elizabeth’s house? Elizabeth was overcome with joy, which spread to Mary. When it did, the beginning of Mary’s

expression went like this: “*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed.*” (Luke 1:46–48)

These are important words—with the key word being *rejoices*. It’s the active form of joy, the verb. And this is Mary choosing and embracing joy in the role she had been given by God.

She didn’t have to.

Remember those cartoons and old movies where an army sergeant or leader asks for a volunteer? The mission is dangerous, sometimes ridiculously so. It will require a brave and true individual willing to put his or her life on the line. Will the bold volunteer please step forward? You know what happens. At the same second, in perfect coordination, the entire line steps backward, leaving the main character standing in front when the leader turns around. Forget volunteering—he is volunteered, whether he likes it or not.

Mary could have looked at her situation a little bit like that. She didn’t ask to be the mother of God’s Son. If she had been asked, she might have stepped backward.

But in Mary’s words we see her response: She rejoices. She chooses joy. She focuses on the big picture and embraces her difficult role.

In a similar way, in our own situations and seasons, we can do the same. We can choose joy. We can rejoice. We can embrace the miracle of God with Us and align our vision with the work He is doing in and through us.

The Bible is filled with verses exhorting and encouraging us to rejoice. Probably because we all need lots of reminders.

Philippians 4:4 “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*”

Romans 12:12 “*Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying.*”

These are only the beginning, but the message and the takeaway is the same: We have reason for joy because God is with us, and we can choose to embrace it.

Let’s choose to make this a season of joy. Let’s rejoice as we figuratively await the arrival of Christ, and let’s celebrate His birth with joy. God is with us. And so joy is with us—a joy that flows deep within our spirits and outward because our King, our Saviour, is with us, always loving, always working, even in the midst of any hardship we will face.