

Sermon Series: “Receiving... Joy”
Salem United Methodist Church
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 3:7-14
December 14, 2014
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We are well into Advent. The excitement of the coming of the Christ Child is building. After two weeks of hope and peace, we move into celebrating joy! These are gifts to us from Jesus, our Messiah and Savior. How do we receive these gifts?

Receiving is a process. First, we have to want a gift. Then we have to wait for it. Third, we have to welcome the gift. So wanting a gift, what does this look like? Have you ever participated in what is called a Yankee Swap at Christmas? In a Yankee Swap everyone brings a gift. Usually a dollar amount is set. The gifts are wrapped and placed on a table. Each person is given a number. Then the numbers are called out one at a time. The first person gets to choose any gift on the table. They open it and everyone “ooohs” and “aaahs.” Then the second number is announced. The second person has a choice between picking out an unknown gift from the table and taking the gift from the first person. If the second person wants the first person’s gift, the first person’s wants are not honored. The second person takes the first person’s gift. The up side for the first person is s/he gets to choose again from the table of gifts again. Then the third number is called and the same process happens. This game of gift giving is fun when there is a gift or two that everyone wants. That gift is wanted, taken, wanted again and taken again until every number has been called. Then the first person can choose among everyone’s gifts or keep his/her own. If s/he wants someone’s gift then they switch what they have with the other person who may or may not want the last person’s gift! It can be great fun. At a Yankee Swap a person can walk away with a present they really wanted or didn’t want at all. I’ve seen gifts actually be left behind or given away immediately because the person didn’t want it. To receive a gift, we have to want it.

The second step in receiving is waiting for the gift. This is what makes children so excited on Christmas morning. They have been waiting for weeks for Santa to bring them gifts! Christmas morning is the only morning that parents don’t have any problem getting their children to wake up. Many are awake before the sun rise. Their waiting is over! They are more than ready to receive their Christmas gifts.

The third step in the process of receiving is opening the gift. Whether it is receiving a gift at a Yankee Swap, on Christmas morning, or at any other time, in order to receive it, we have to open it. What good is a gift if we just leave the beautifully wrapped package sit on a shelf and never take off the paper to see what is inside! The gift is useless just sitting there looking nice. Besides if we let it wrapped, we would miss out on what the giver had so carefully chosen for us. We would miss out on the joy of the gift!

Mary was given a gift. It was one she had not considered or wanted. She had not waited for it and it was a gift she didn’t need to unwrap. However, she did have to decide if she wanted to receive it or not. What if Mary would have said to the angel Gabriel, “Tell God, no thank you! I don’t want this gift. It is too much for me to face. Being pregnant without a husband will create such a scandal. Everyone, my family, my friends, the whole community will disown me. Joseph, my finance’, will know this is not his child. Legally, he can have me killed for adultery. No, tell God to find another girl! This is not how I planned my life!” What if Mary had not received this gift? What if Mary said, “No,” to God? What gifts does God want to give us, but we say, “Thanks, but no thanks?” But Mary did say, “Yes” to the scandalous interruption of her life. What makes a young girl of perhaps 12 years old say, “Yes” to this kind of gift? Naiveté? Is it blind faith and trust? Did you notice when Mary says, “Yes?” It is when she realizes that she is not alone. Of course, she wasn’t alone, God was with her. After all she’s carrying God’s baby, but in the middle of a scandal even the words, “God is with you,” can ring hollow. The fear of what will happen tomorrow is very real for this young girl. Mary accepts the gift only after Gabriel tells her that a member of her family who was barren is miraculously pregnant, too. She will have someone to journey with her during this difficult time. This is when she states, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.” She immediately goes to join Elizabeth. With her, Mary would find security, solace, and encouragement. And she was right. Elizabeth calls Mary, “blessed,” because Elizabeth’s baby in utero leapt with joy! What confirmation! In the very depths of Mary’s soul, she trusted in God, but with all the negativity happening all around her, she questioned herself. Elizabeth gave Mary the courage to look at the gift more closely and realize what she has been given. Because Mary had someone who believed in her, who encouraged her, who blessed

her, she could receive this awesome gift with joy! And she praises God with her whole being! I can visualize her dancing and singing with joy! “God is sooo good! God is sooo wonderful! What mercy! Only God can turn things upside down and make them right! God never breaks a promise. He is fulfilling this promise in me!” In the midst of a scandal, Mary exudes joy! She realizes on a deeper level that God is really with her.

Joy is not to be mistaken for happiness. Happiness is a feeling. Joy is not. Joy is a spiritual gift given to us by God. We can do everything to create holiday happiness by giving gifts, drinking too much, eating too much, and over decorating, but this kind of joy will dissipate. The gifts will be forgotten. We will wake up with a hangover. We will gain weight and/or have indigestion. And when Christmas is over, we have to put away all those Christmas decorations. The joy has disappeared and we slide into the January doldrums. Why? Because this is human made happiness only lasts for a moment. It is not to be mistaken for the real gift of joy given to us by God. Joy is born in a deep place in our souls when we know that God is really with us. The world can be falling apart around us, but we know that God has our back. We know that God is making this journey with us. It is realizing that Jesus is the good news. Jesus heals our broken hearts. Jesus sets us free from whatever imprisons us. Jesus comforts everyone who mourns by taking our sorrow and transforming it into joy. Jesus can take what is ruined and restore it so that it is better than new. It is realizing that Jesus is our Joy. This joy resonates deep within us!

Life coach and author, Don Joseph Goeway, writes about this transformation on his blog entitled, “The Best Christmas Gift I Ever Received.” Thirty years ago around Thanksgiving he was diagnosed with a benign brain tumor that would kill him if he didn’t have it removed. The earliest the surgery could be scheduled was in the early part of January. Don and his tumor would have to go through Christmas together. It would be the worst Christmas ever. Christmas was not his favorite time of year. Don hated the shopping, putting up the outdoor Christmas decorations, the parties, the small talk with inebriated people, spending times with dreaded relatives and all the stress. He writes, “The holidays were a month-long mania that reached a frenetic climax on Christmas day, and then collapsed into depression when the credit card bill arrived.” Now Don had to deal with the real fear of dying or being permanently disabled. Which was worse the potential reality of this or the fear of it? Don realized that the fear was crippling him, “painting me in a dark corner of gloom and doom.” As this fear grasped him in the middle of the night, Don got up and looked out the window into the black hole of darkness. Then something happened. He began to see the glow of the moonlight shining through the trees. A sense of peace overcame him and drove out his fear. The light was shining in the darkness. Hope moved into the spot where fear resided. As Don let go of the fear, joy took over. The next morning he saw a bumper sticker that stated, “Peace is the Reason for the Season.” This message helped him realize that we cannot receive peace if we judge or condemn. So he stopped his judging and began to forgive himself and others around him. Don began to count his blessings. Suddenly he began to see joy in the faces of children. He noticed that this is one time of the year in which hearts are open and people really do extend joy, peace, hope, and love to others. So Don decided to do so, too. He extended compassion to those who were frustrated and stressed. He practiced being at peace when shopping or stuck in a traffic jam. And he shared his joy with whomever he could!

Don had the tumor removed. The surgery was a success. Physically all was well, but the experience changed him. In his blog, Don doesn’t attribute this change to Jesus, but he does claim it to be the best Christmas present he ever received. Who else but God incarnate could transform fear into joy? Who created the reason for the season? During Christmas what is painting you into a corner of doom and gloom? Can you see the light shining in the darkness? How is Jesus offering you the Gift of Joy this Advent? How are you receiving it? If you want it, if you have waited for it, if you are unwrapping it, embrace it, and then share. There are many who are waiting to receive it, too. Good Christian friends, rejoice! Christ was born for this!

Resources: *All I Want For Christmas* by James Harnish; *The Birth of the Messiah* by Raymond Brown; *Christmas is Not Your Birthday* by Mike Slaughter; *Not a Silent Night* by Adam Hamilton; “The Best Christmas I Ever Received,” by Don Joseph Goeway; <http://donjosephgoeway.com/>