

“LIFE-CHANGING JOY!”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
December 24, 2014

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

One year, on the first Sunday of Advent, a Sunday School teacher asked her class of six-year-olds what the season before Christmas was called. “Oh, I know, I know!” shouted one young boy with glee, “It’s called Advil!”

Well, it may not be called Advil, but there’s plenty of times during Advent that we probably swallowed some of them. Oh, it’s a hectic time of year we’re just wrapping up, isn’t it? Anybody here tired?

I know you are. I know I am. I mean, there’s so much to do, so many places to go, so many lists to make, so much to try to get accomplished. We pretty much spend the month of December on overload.

And it’s not just buying and wrapping presents, it’s Christmas parties, and school programs, and Christmas pageants, and Christmas cantatas, and cleaning and cooking, and wrapping. It’s no wonder we’re all wiped out.

I had an experience the other day with which I’m sure many of you can identify. I took one whole evening to get the gifts I am giving organized. I laid them all out on the dining room table to make sure I had what I needed. I got the wrapping paper, gift tags, ribbon, tape, pen and list there, and despite the help of a cat that wanted to jump in all the bags, I got everything wrapped, labeled, and ready to go.

On Monday, just two days ago, I wanted to put the envelope I had prepared for the mail carrier in the mailbox – just a small token of my appreciation for delivering my mail every day. So I went to the dining room table to get it, and it wasn’t there. I looked all over the place, then thought, well, maybe I put it on the kitchen table – no. Well, maybe I put it somewhere near the front door – no. Well, maybe for some reason, I stuck it in my purse. I knew – absolutely knew – that I had put that envelope together for him – and I couldn’t find it – and it was driving me crazy. I was about to lose my mind, when for some reason, I had to go back into the dining room to pick up another present for someone else, and lo and behold, underneath that package was an envelope that said, “Mail Carrier.”

Now, I know that's no big deal, but isn't that about what these days before Christmas are like? Craziness! I can't tell you the number of people that I've talked to in the past few days who have forgotten to be somewhere they were supposed to be, or, like me, lost something and it was driving them crazy, or others who have stayed up all hours of the night because they can't get everything done.

It's exhausting, so we come here tonight a collection of weary folks. And we're not just weary because we're so busy, we're weary as well because of sickness, sin and struggle, and of what's going on in the world. I mean, I turned on the news first thing Monday morning, and after listening for a few minutes, I just wanted to get back under the covers and call it a day! Cyber hacking, international threats being lobbed back and forth, drug use and abuse running rampant, college students missing, police who lay their lives down each and every day to protect others murdered in broad daylight.

It's all too much, and so we come to this place weary tonight. We come because we need, more than ever, to sit in the sacredness of this holy place, to drink in the colors and the candlelight and the beautiful sounds, to greet old friends and make new ones, to hear the wondrous Gospel story.

And do you remember how that story starts? It starts with weariness. Mary and Joseph, weary from their hundred mile trek to Bethlehem; weary from frustration at even having to make this journey at all for a census, of all things so late in Mary's pregnancy; weary from knocking on door after door and finding no place to lay their head; weary from laying in a crude stable laboring to give birth – weary.

Until that moment when Jesus is born! Mary, like all of you who have ever had a child, knew that moment of ultimate joy and love like no other, when he was laid into her arms, and she looked at his little face. Immediate, instant, overwhelming love and joy! Her weariness, Joseph's weariness – gone in that wonderful moment.

But their joy went even deeper, because they knew, in their arms they held the Savior of the World. He was no ordinary baby, He was the One sent from God to save the world. A deep joy filled their hearts.

That's our joy tonight as well, my friends. That God has come into the world in Jesus, and as one pastor so beautifully put it, "is born among us in the only way that bridges heaven with earth. For God has taken on human flesh and dwelt among us." (Jon Walton, "Angels Bending Near the Earth," 12/24/2009)

Out of love for us, God took on human flesh, and in Jesus, walked where we walk, experienced life as we experience it, suffered as we suffer, rejoiced as we rejoice. That's how much God loved us – that is the source of our joy this night and every night.

So let me tell you for just a few moments tonight through a couple of stories what that means for you and me.

Some of you may recognize the name Joni Eareckson Tada. Joni grew up in Baltimore, the youngest of four daughters. When she was just 17 years old, back in 1967, one day she went swimming in the Chesapeake Bay, misjudged the shallowness of the water, hit the bottom and fractured vertebrae leaving her paralyzed from the chest down. Obviously, it was a devastating injury and devastating for her at such a tender time in her life.

She went through serious depression as she tried to adjust to life in a wheelchair. The next year, at Christmas, she was still struggling, still prone to depression. She was watching all of her friends do all of the normal teenage things and she was stuck in that wheelchair for the rest of her life.

Well, her friends decided they would try to cheer her up at Christmas, so they came over to her house a few days before Christmas and told her they were going to take her for a road trip. They were going to all pile into a car, drive down into the city of Baltimore to Pennsylvania Station and sing Christmas carols there. She thought it sounded a bit nuts, but her friends insisted, so they picked her up, put her in the front seat of her friends '65 Camaro and off they went.

They got to Penn Station, put her back in her wheelchair, and went inside the cavernous building. There were not a lot of people around, but nevertheless they began to sing Christmas carols with gusto – “Joy to the World, the Lord is come.”

Not long after they started, a security guard showed up. “You guys need to move on. You can't do that here. This isn't a Christmas party, or church. You're not allowed to sing here.” And then, he turned to Joni and said, “And you, get out of that chair. It's not a toy, missy. Put it back where you found it!”

Well, Joni's mouth dropped open, and she said, “I know it's not a toy. I can't get out of it.”

Again, the guard said, “You heard what I said. Put it back right now!”

Joni replied, “I can't. You don't understand! I'm paralyzed. It's my chair!”

With that, the security guard turned all shades of red, and cleared his throat, and said, “Well, all of you, get on your way. You need to go home.”

Joni said that they had barely gotten out the front door before they all burst out laughing! She said that she laughed until she had tears running down her face – not just because of the absurdity of it all, but because for that brief moment the

security guard treated her like a normal teenager – she was just like the rest of them.

And even more, she said, they were tears of joy for Jesus making a way for her – helping her through this difficult time in her life in a most wonderful way. And since that day, Joni says, Jesus has continued to do that all along the way. Weary though she must be because of her physical limitations, yet Joni knows the joy of Jesus who knows her struggle and is right there with her, making a way. (On-line, Joni’s Blog, Christmas 2013)

That’s the joy of Christmas, friends – a Jesus who walks with us in our life, and makes a way for us in our weariness.

Finally, a story from a school in New York City. The school is actually part of First Presbyterian Church of New York City, and it’s a school for autistic children. The pastor there, Jon Walton, tells their story. He says it’s a wonderful school for these children with special needs. And he’s blessed to be around them and see what wonderful care they get.

Listen to what he says about them:

“Autistic children live in a world all their own. And some days are very good, and other days are very bad. But one thing is for sure, good day or bad, autistic children are limited in their options to communicate.

Like Longfellow’s ‘ . . . little girl who had a little curl . . . when she was good, she was very, very good, but when she was bad, she was horrid . . . ‘ when one of our children has a bad day, he or she cries . . . a lot. And if he cries long and hard enough a teacher in the school upstairs takes the child out into the hallway so as to be less disruptive.

And if the child keeps on crying, and is inconsolable and is upsetting the other children, the teacher brings the child downstairs into the lobby of the church and there is a hallway just outside my office (Walton says), where a child can kick and scream and roll on the floor, and cry as long and as loudly as they want. And they do. Now this usually happens on Friday mornings when I am working on my sermon for the weekend. It’s uncanny how the timing works. The more important the sermon needs to be, like for Christmas Eve, the more likely the crying.”

Walton says that he used to resent this and wondered if there wasn’t someplace else they could take those children. Until one day – one day when he’d had enough of the crying and screaming – and he went out into the hallway to see what he could do about it.

And this is what he saw, in his own words: “I saw a teacher, a New York City public school teacher, holding a child four or five years old in her arms, down on the floor with that little boy who was having a horrid day, frightened by God-knows-what, unable to say anything intelligible or discernable to explain it, and who was

crying for all that was within him. Who, because of that teacher, and her loving arms, was not alone.” (Jon Walton, “No Crying He Makes?,” 12/24/10)

My friends, if that’s not a picture of Jesus, I don’t know what is. The baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, whose birth we celebrate tonight, holds us in His arms – always – in times of joy, and in times of weariness and sorrow – and we are never, ever alone. That’s why this night we are filled with joy. That’s why this night we lift our weary voices and sing with the angels in heaven, “Joy to the World, the Lord is come!” Because, on this night, Christ the Savior is Born, and all is well, and all will yet be well! We are never alone. Thanks be to God.

Amen.