

"Ah, Reunions!"

Advent 2020, "What Are We Waiting For?", part 3

Luke 1:26-45

[SLIDE 1] Merry Christmas! Are you excited? How is the waiting going? Here we are, the third Sunday in Advent, only twelve days 'til Christmas, and the tension is so thick, we might need Rudolph's nose to see through it. It is a stressful season, but I for one am glad for this moment to pause together in worship and remember this is a season about Joy, Peace, Hope, and Love; not anxiety, bickering, disappointment and greed. Turn to your neighbor for a moment and tell them, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season." We need to remind each other of that. Remember, you're in the right place this morning.

Will you pray with me? Dear God, this is your time to shine. Help me to simply get out of your way. May the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (*Psalm 19:14*)

[SLIDE 2] Christmas is often a season of reunions. Think back for a moment: who was at your last Christmas gathering? Did you travel? Did someone come to you? What makes this year especially hard is that many of our face-to-face gatherings have been cancelled. We will miss that excitement. However, there actually is an upside to this. First, more of us are taking the time to reconnect on social media with long-lost friends. I recently said hello to my college marching band director for the first time in twenty years, as well as many other classmates. And second, we get to skip the moments we were dreading: like Grandma's killer fruitcake. (Break into Elmo Shropshire's "Grandma's Killer Fruitcake" song.)

[SLIDES 3-14]

[SLIDE 15] I know most of us would give anything to be able to reconnect with our friends and family if we could do so safely, fruitcake or not. And yet, there are many of us secretly breathing a sigh of relief because major anxiety AND heartburn has been avoided. I'd guess most of us are somewhere in between those two extremes.

[SLIDE 16] I typically celebrate a reunion with my camp staff family at Lake Louise each February. A lot of us we grew up together going to summer camp. There are over twenty of us, and whenever we gather, we spend a lot of time

catching up. On Friday night, we just sit in a circle and ask, "How is it with your soul?" There is a lot of laughter, often some tears, but always a sense of reassurance and love. Once a new counselor said our retreat is like walking into someone else's family reunion.

Do you wish you had close friendships like that? Do you wish you had someone with whom you shared common experiences, with whom you shared joy and struggles? I certainly want to experience joy in all of my relationships. I hope you are like me that way. Because our scripture this morning is about Mary and Elizabeth, who modeled exactly that kind of close relationship.

[SLIDE 17] In the gospel of Luke, chapter 1, we find this story of two cousins who were both unexpectedly and miraculously pregnant. Elizabeth and her husband, Zachariah, had been told by an angel that they would have a son, named John, who would be a great prophet. Then, six months later, Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her she would give birth to the Messiah. These two women experience a whole gambit of emotions, from joy and excitement to wonder and questioning.

The passage says Mary "hurried" to Judea to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary was not going just to prove that the angel was telling the truth. She was going to share her joy and help Elizabeth in the third trimester. All in all, going to Judea probably was a good idea for both women.

When I have family show up unexpectedly, we have fun and laugh. My cousin was here a few weeks ago, visiting the college campus. It was a boisterous meeting, and we joked and played cards. Actually, my wife appreciated that we wore masks – our voices were loud enough on their own!

Mary and Elizabeth didn't play cards, but their greeting was also boisterous. In fact, this feels like a musical number. The two women say things we would never actually say ourselves. [SLIDE 18] Elizabeth proclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" (*verse 42*). Mary goes on to sing: "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." (*verse 46*).

Maybe those are odd words, but shouldn't this be what Christmas is about? We should be bursting with joy, especially this time of year. Maybe you and I would feel funny saying those words in a loud voice if we weren't in some sort of

Christmas production. Yet the truth is, we are a part of this story. Their joy is ours, and it can spill over into our relationships. No oxytocin is required! Mary and Elizabeth are sharing their part in God's great story. So can we.

[SLIDE 19] Here's the point that Mary and Elizabeth are trying to tell us: a truly joyous reunion has Jesus Christ at its center.

Sometimes we forget, Mary and Elizabeth were people just like us. They had doubts. They had anxiety. Mary had to be nervous, carrying her first child. Did Elizabeth even know about Mary's pregnancy? How shocked and surprised was Elizabeth when her teenage cousin showed up and her baby leapt in her womb? What did that feel like? If I feel a somersault in my stomach, that is usually a very, very bad thing.

This first Christmas reunion is dripping with joy. Women, men, babies are constantly moving. Leaping. Praising. Hurrying. Greeting. Exclaiming. Because these women are sharing faith and experience, joy is overflowing.

Can I be real with you for a moment? My camp retreat is a great reunion. We share hugs and faith and stories and food. Mary and Elizabeth, in the midst of the craziness around them, are joyful. But not all reunions are like that, are they? I look forward to whenever I can see my extended family, but maybe you're not so keen to see yours.

[SLIDE 20] There might be some dysfunction, some hurt, some words spoken in the past. Some reunions we don't enjoy. We have it up to here with packing and presents and cooking, the long drive with the kids yelling in the back seat. We have to listen to Uncle Joe go on and on about his health and all the ills of society. Or we have to put up with those lovely little "angels" who run all around the house, eat all the good cookies, and knock over the Christmas tree while they are fighting over what holiday movie to watch. Those reunions are real, and they might make us shudder. Those reunions suck the joy right out of us.

[SLIDE 21] And there are many who have no reunion at all to look forward to. Perhaps a loved one has passed away. The family has moved away, and it's too far for them to come back. In both cases, we desperately need to find the joy of Christmas for ourselves.

I have an idea. Mary and Elizabeth show us how we can unlock the secret to love and joy this Christmas. These two women put Christ first. Can't we do that, too? [SLIDE 22] Isn't the big idea here that we all need to put Christ at the center of all our relationships, both our friends and our family?

I'd say yes. Putting Christ first in your life is the best decision you will ever make, and I guarantee, it will bring you lasting joy, not temporary happiness that fades after the presents are unwrapped. Christ died to save us sinners, and we can open our hearts to receive him as Lord and Savior and live to serve him by serving others.

We are in this together. Part of my deepest longing is for all people to realize that. We are entering a time when annually, people return to church. They are looking for something: Memories of a time past. Traditional music. The Christmas story. My deepest wish is that we all would find fulfillment and know this love and joy year-round.

Whether or not you have a family reunion in the next three weeks, there is someone God has placed in your life whom you can serve. It doesn't even matter if they don't believe in Jesus. You can serve them. You can share your faith. There is nothing that can ever prevent you from putting Christ first in your life. Are your words awkward, or natural as Elizabeth's? If Christ is at the center of your life, you're going to talk about him without hesitating. If Jesus is the center of your life, it will be reflected in your speech, your service, your attitude and your giving...everywhere!

[SLIDE 23] Christmas is an annual opportunity to remind ourselves to put Christ first again. We can reflect the joy we hear in Mary and Elizabeth's voices, even without the angels. Remember, neither Mary nor Elizabeth had an easy life. Mary had to explain a miraculous pregnancy to her parents and friends. Joseph nearly divorced her. Elizabeth had what we would politely call today a "high-risk" pregnancy. The Bible is blunt: Elizabeth was old. Thank goodness her younger cousin was there to help! These two women, in spite of everything, proclaimed their joy. Before he was even born, they called Jesus "Savior".

Think about that. What faith does it take to acknowledge Jesus as Savior without ever seeing him, without knowing he will be born, die on a cross, rise

from the dead, and ascend to his rightful throne on high? To love Jesus without seeing him face to face is hard. Yet, it is the very thing God asks of you today.

[SLIDE 24] Hebrews 2:2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The one and only person who can give us eternal life and everlasting joy is the Son of God, who was born into this world as a poor baby and died on a cross to free us from our sin. This is King Jesus, who lives and reigns, and who can make our reunions as joyful as Mary and Elizabeth's.

[SLIDE 25] Picture someone in your mind: family or friend, someone you will connect with soon, in-person or on the phone or computer. What would be the best thing that could ever happen to them? What would cause joy at your next reunion with them? Do they know Jesus? Do you believe God can do a miracle in their life?

Friends, everyone can know the joy of the Lord. Everyone can know the miracle of a new life, of forgiveness and purpose. This reunion is real. Every moment of every day, Jesus offers us a relationship with him at the center, to live by the Holy Spirit, proclaiming in a loud voice, "Blessed is the Lord! Why would I be so favored to have God come visit me?" You don't have to be pregnant, thank goodness, but you do have to allow someone to come live inside of you. There's a ton of stuff he is ready to do, if you will let him. And when you do, you will experience the greatest reunion you have ever known. You will be united with the one who loves you, who created you, and who formed you for his family. All you have to do is say, "Lord Jesus, thank you for fulfilling your promises in me."

Wherever you may be this season, whomever you are with, may the joy of Christmas be yours, as you proclaim the truth that Jesus is here to save the world.

MEMORY VERSE:

Mark 3:35 "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Who is someone in your life you are always glad to see?
2. How does sharing a common faith in Christ strengthen your relationships?

3. When have you seen God work miracles in yourself and the people around you?
4. How does having fellowship with other believers prepare us for Christmas?
5. Whom are you praying for this Christmas to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior?