

*Joy in the Dark*

Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; 3:2-6

Whitefish UMC

December 11, 2011

- ✦ If you pay attention to the news and the political craziness that already fills the airwaves, internet, and other media, it's easy to become discouraged. As I wrote this sermon, I heard a spokesman for Virginia Tech University intone with such sadness and despair the news that that campus had been terrorized once again with a mindless shooting that killed an innocent campus police officer.
- ✦ On this Sunday, "Gaudete Sunday," the third Sunday in Advent, we're supposed to put aside the somber reflections of the season before Christmas to express our joy at the coming again of our Savior, Jesus, on Christmas. The word gaudete is from the Latin mass, and it means "rejoice."
- ✦ What gives us cause to rejoice in the face of the darkness and violence of the world, of severe illness, famine, and poverty? The other day I stumbled upon a posting from one of my colleagues, Mark Thurman, pastor in Riverton, Wyoming. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, he said: "There are more pine trees than pine beetles can kill. Isaiah says so."
- ✦ Nevertheless, we may have to look hard for joy these days, in spite of ourselves. The other morning I was sitting in my chair by the window early in the morning when a huge flock of Bohemian waxwings swooped into our yard to feast on rose hips and Mountain Ash berries. Their beauty took my breath away. I know that people call a bunch of larks "an exultation of larks." There ought to be "an exultation of

Bohemian waxwings,” too. For these rather ordinary birds brought exultant joy to me. Do you ever find yourself looking for joy in spite of the world around you?

- ✦ In the same way, it wasn't easy for the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth to find hope and joy embodied in their lives, either. Although they had been loyal and faithful to God and to each other throughout their long lives, they had never been blessed with a child. Remember that in first century Palestine, childlessness was considered a sign of God's punishment for some sinfulness in a couple, no in the woman. And Elizabeth was now too old to bear a child.
- ✦ Yet Zechariah had gone about his priestly duties, and Elizabeth had never lost hope. Zechariah was rewarded with serving as high priest in the Jerusalem temple. While serving there, the angel Gabriel came to him, with the angel's typical greeting: “Do not be afraid!” But Zechariah was afraid, and when the angel told him that Elizabeth would bear a son, named John, he couldn't believe it.
- ✦ The angel proclaimed that Zechariah and Elizabeth would have great joy and gladness, that their son would be great in the sight of the Lord. That he would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and turn the hearts of the people toward God. He would prepare the way of the Lord!
- ✦ And because Zechariah couldn't believe in the joy to come, his voice was silenced.
- ✦ Yes, Zechariah couldn't believe it. He went home, and even though his beloved Elizabeth did conceive as the angel had said, they remained in seclusion for five months.
- ✦ Now let's interrupt this biblical story with another one. There were once two identical twins. They were alike in every way but one. One

was a joy-filled optimist who only ever saw the bright side of life. The other was a dark pessimist, who only ever saw the down side of every situation.

- ✦ The parents were so worried about the extremes of optimism and pessimism in their boys that they took them to the doctor. He suggested a plan. “On their next birthday give the pessimist a shiny new bike, but give the optimist a pile of manure.”
- ✦ It seemed a fairly extreme thing to do. After all, the parents had always treated their boys equally. But in this instance, they decided to try the doctor’s advice. So when the twins’ birthday came around, they gave the pessimist the most expensive, top of the line, racing bike a child has ever owned. When he saw the bike his first words were, “I’ll probably crash and break my leg.”
- ✦ To the optimist, they gave a carefully wrapped box of manure. He opened it, looked puzzled for a moment, then ran outside screaming, “You can’t fool me! Where there’s this much manure, there’s just gotta be a pony around here somewhere!”
- ✦ Today we celebrate the Third Sunday in Advent, along with the baptism of Daryl and the reception of our new members. This is a season of expectation, a season of anticipation, a season of promise. Someone said that Advent is the season in which the optimistic and the pessimistic parts of her sit down to tea.
- ✦ In the course of their conversation with each other, the pessimist bluntly points out to the optimist that all is not right with the world. “The pony you wish to discover won’t be found in your lifetime,” proclaims the pessimist. “Indeed, there is much that needs fixing if

- the pony is to be found at all. In the meantime, you are stuck with manure!”
- ✦ To which the optimist responds, maybe a tad bit overenthusiastically, “but what an adventure, a challenge it would be to find that pony. Think of all we could experience and learn! What a journey it would be, and besides, manure makes the roses bloom!”
  - ✦ Pessimism points out the darkness, optimism locates the flashlight. And it is their children Hope and Joy who actually go out to meet the darkness and shine the light on it.
  - ✦ In between the time that John the Baptist was born, to great rejoicing as the scriptures say, and to Zechariah’s canticle which we read this morning, Elizabeth and Zechariah had to wait. But in the waiting, they experienced the great joy of their little cousin Mary coming to them in her pregnancy and disgrace. And when she came, the child in Elizabeth’s womb jumped for joy.
  - ✦ “And you, child, shall be the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way, to give God’s people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
  - ✦ For this joy, and for the joy of anticipating the Light of God who will shine like a giant flashlight to illuminate and bring hope to a wounded world, we give thanks.
  - ✦ The poet Jane Kenyon, writing in the winter of 1993 in Serbia, expresses the joy of Advent waiting in the dark. Think back to what it was like in Serbia in 1993. Bombs fell, rogue armies committed

unspeakable atrocities, and rubble filled once-lovely streets. She contemplates an ancient mosaic in one of the cathedrals still standing:

✦ *On the domed ceiling God*

*is thinking:*

*I made them my joy,  
and everything else I created*

*I made to bless them.*

*But see what they do!*

*I know their hearts*

*and arguments:*

✦ *“We’re descended from*

*Cain. Evil is nothing new,  
so what does it matter now*

*if we shell the infirmary,  
and the well where the fearful*

*and rash alike must*

*come for water?”*

✦ *God thinks Mary into being.*

*Suspended at the apogee  
of the golden dome,*

*she curls in a brown pod,*

*and inside her the mind*

*of Christ, cloaked in blood,*

*lodges and begins to grow.*

✦ This is the joy we express this day as well. Not naïve, mindless joy, but the joy of knowing that despite all pessimism and despair, God continues to create in us the capacity and longing to birth the Christ in

us. Can you find that joy, even in the dark? I pray that you will.  
Amen.