**Advent Three – JOY. (Dec 12th) – Philippians 4:4-7**

*Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!*

I don’t know about you, but I have always loved Christmas. I find it easy to be filled with joy and rejoice! I think I must have an inner child in me that just wants to burst out with Joy at Christmas. I love:

* decorating the house;
* putting up the tree;
* listening to Christmas music;
* wrapping presents;
* entertaining guests; and yes, even ….
* watching predictable but heartwarming Christmas Hallmark movies.

I love it all! In fact, you could say that my joy of Christmas is the complete opposite from the Grinch!

How many of you here – let’s have a show of hands – find it easy to be joyful at Christmas?

So, why do you think that is?

Well, I think the simple answer is the Christmas story is full of Joy!

Joy appears again and again in the story.

To start with, there is Mary’s cousin Elizabeth.

When Mary comes to visit her, Elizabeth is already filled with joy because she herself has been told she will give birth to a son. Elizabeth is barren and beyond childbearing years, so she is ecstatic at this news. But, even more than that, she is told that her son has been chosen. The angel said:

*“You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth… he will be great in the eyes of the Lord.”* (Luke 1:14-15)

Could you imagine hearing that about your life or your child’s life?

Chosen by God?

Elizabeth is bubbling with Joy!

And then, there is the baby in Elizabeth’s womb who we all know to be John the Baptist.

When Mary arrives at Elizabeth’s home, we are told that Elizabeth’s baby literally leaps for Joy.

Now anyone who has been pregnant here will tell you about babies moving and kicking in the womb - but the scripture suggests that this was far more than that. The unborn child jumps for joy because somehow through the mystery of the Spirit, the baby John knows that the Son of God, is next to him in Mary’s womb. Wow!

And, we’re told that the unborn baby John is so excited, and so full of the Holy Spirit, that when he leaps in Elizabeth’s womb, she too becomes full of the Holy Spirit. Luke’s gospel tells us:

“*When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped for joy in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Luke 1:41)*

John is leaping with Joy.

And then there is Mary.

Now I am sure that Mary had huge doubts, and was full of uncertainties. After all, she was an unwed teenager who has been told she is pregnant!

And not only that, but she’s told that she will give birth to the Son of God! Even with all the faith in the world, I imagine that her head must be exploding!

Imagine that you are Mary for a second. An angel comes to you, and tells you that you will be pregnant with God on earth. What’s your reaction?

I know that part of me would be thinking:

 “Okay, was that really God? Did God really say that to me?”

My first reaction would be to try and get some sort of sign to know that I am not going crazy. Someone to come and tell me I’m doing the right thing.

With all the faith in the world, I’d need to know this was true.

And that’s possibly how Mary was thinking, when she arrived at Elizabeth’s – and then she gets the validation that she needed.

Elizabeth doesn’t just great her cousin with a “Hi”. She says:

 *“God has blessed you above all women and your child is blessed. Why am I so lucky that the mother of my Lord would visit me?”* (Luke 1:43)

And as soon as Mary gets the much need validation, her reaction is to be filled with Joy!

In Elizabeth she recognizes someone that she can talk to for support.

She knows now that she is not alone.

She begins to understand that God is with her.

And, she is able to overcome her fear and trepidation, and she begins to sing with Joy. We know her song of Praise to God as the Magnificat:

 *“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God.”*

 (Luke 1:46)

Mary is singing with Joy.

And then if we move forward in the story – we get a glimpse of the joy and the excitement of the shepherds.

When they are told about the birth of a child lying in a manger, they don’t dilly dally and wonder what to do. No! We are told they quickly and excitedly “*Make haste”* to see for themselves.

And after finding out that it is all true – they are so filled with excitement and joy that they hurry to tell everyone else the good news. They are the very first missionaries!

The Shepherds are eagerly sharing the Joy.

And of course, although the Magi do not appear on the scene until much later, they see a star in the sky which immediately excites them too. On a long journey they follow it, and when they see it come to rest, we are told that they are “*overwhelmed with joy”* (Matthew 2:10)

The Magi are filled with Joy.

But most importantly, the heart of the Joy in this story is in the birth of a baby.

How many of you have every gazed on a newborn baby?

There is something about looking into the face of a newborn, that simply fills us with joy. That’s why, perhaps, babies are called “bundles of joy.”

Theologian and writer John Philip Newell often shares the story of being overwhelmed by seeing his newborn grandson for the first time, and he tells how profoundly spiritual the experience was. He says he felt the presence of God.

Ancient Celtic Christians believed that infants came from God, and that in gazing at a newborn’s face, we see the very image of God; and conversely, through the infant’s eyes, in some mysterious way, God beholds us.

If all newborns are considered a joyful gift from God, then imagine how much more joyful the birth of Jesus was.

It was the birth of the very embodiment of the Divine.

As Mary cradled her baby and looked into his face, she also looked into the face of God.

The baby Jesus was the Joy of God.

The Christmas story is one that speaks again and again about Joy.

But, where are we in this story?

What part do you identify with?

Are you like Elizabeth, and bubbling with Joy because you know that God hears your prayers? Even if sometimes it takes a long while to know and understand the answer to those prayers?

Are you like the unborn John, and leaping for Joy as you experience and come into the presence of God this Advent? Perhaps there have been some moments this Advent when you have truly felt the presence of God – for me, I felt it at the outdoor Nativity last week.

Are you like the angelic hosts, and you sing praises of Joy and thanksgiving to God? Not just singing in church – but singing with joy as you go about your ordinary and mundane tasks in the week.

Are you like the shepherds, and you eagerly share the joy of knowing Jesus with others? Do you tell others about your faith – invite them into conversation, or ask them to come to church with you?

Or are you like Mary, and do you have the courage to look into the face of God? Are you willing to be vulnerable enough to allow God to look back at you, and courageous enough to allow God to use you? Because when you are, you will experience the peace and Joy of God, which passes all human understanding.

As we draw closer to the stable and into a story that we all know very well. I encourage you to look at it with fresh eyes. Ask yourself where you are in the story. It is a story of miracles, mystery, and Joy. And may that Joy speak to you, and fill you, today and always.

Amen.