



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

I'm Coming to Your House

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 1:39-45

December 5, 2021 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Christmas will be different this year... different from last year. Last year—before vaccines and boosters. Last year there was no one in the sanctuary to sing the carols. Our Christmas celebrations were quieter. Fewer people to gather. Not much travel. Have you ever noticed how much traveling there is in the Biblical story of Christmas? The Shepherds have to high-tail it to Bethlehem. Magi come from the East. Even Mary and Joseph leave the northland of Nazareth and travel to the City of David. I'm sure they all thought the travel to Bethlehem was strange. It's not like it was a bucket-list trip. Shepherds were sent by Angels. Mary and Joseph sent by Caesar. The Magi followed the star. It's different for us. There's something magical about Christmas travel for us, because travel at Christmas is almost always travel home.

There's another trip I didn't mention. That's the one in our text this morning. Mary traveled; maybe it was home. It was her cousin Elizabeth's house. Maybe that was Mary's village. It was certainly a bit like a homecoming.

I remember when I was in college. The fall semester ended around December 20 or 21. I would finish my last exam, turn in my blue book... Do you remember those? I was exhausted because I spent every night for a week cramming for the next exam. I would throw dirty clothes in my car and drive the 175 miles home. I would open the back door and in an instant, like magic, it would be Christmas. The lights were on the tree. Presents stacked beneath it. The old creche my dad got in Ecuador would be on the mantle. The Advent candles on the kitchen table.

A few hours earlier, when I was in the midst of exams, Christmas seemed a million miles away... you couldn't have found a "fa-la-la" in me if you dug all the way down. But in a moment, everything changed.

I walked through the door at home and the joy of Christmas was present.

We are thinking about joy this season. I want us to think about joy because it's not always easy to find in this world. The pressures and strains of the world are heavy. It's not just Covid. But the relentless drumbeat of violence and constant shootings. It's the expanding economic insecurity that threatens communities. It's the regular failure of institutions to demonstrate honor. And the consistent storms that come to personal life. Joy is a rare disposition. But for people of faith, joy can be a friend, a fairly constant companion.

I want us to reflect on our greatest reason for joy—even in a world that gives us many reasons not to be joyful, joy is ours. I say that but I realize that for most of us, including myself at times, our joy seems to be running a quart low. But listen to this passage and see if it reminds us again of our reason for joy.

Mary is visited by the angel with unparalleled news, inexplicable news, that Mary is wrapping her head around: The spirit of God will take on flesh. And that she will give birth to a child who is of flesh like every other child *and* a child born of God's spirit like no other child.

And the first thing that Mary does is she makes a bee-line... as my grandmother used to say. I'm not sure what a bee-line is, but she goes directly to her cousin Elizabeth's house. And with no more than a "yoo hoo, guess who's home?" Elizabeth explodes in joy. Oh, you need to remember this: Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah are pregnant with a child who will be John the Baptist. They are old, Presbyterian Home kind of old. So, when the angel told Zechariah—who had lived his whole life without the blessing of children—that now, in his old age, he was going to

have a son, Zechariah was a bit unsure. As a result, the angel strikes Zechariah mute. So, when Mary arrives, it is only Elizabeth who can talk. And man, does she talk.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy... blessed is she who believed...”

Oh my. You wonder if Zechariah being struck mute actually changed any conversation patterns at home. It’s fair to say Elizabeth is overjoyed. Mary comes to visit and Elizabeth can barely contain her joy. Because love has arrived. And in the ways of providence, Elizabeth seems to recognize that it’s not just her cousin who has come but the love of God who has come to her door.

When love comes to visit, joy comes too. David Wythe, in his beautiful little book, *Consolations*, has said, joy is a “deep form of love.”¹ I think he’s right. Joy is a relational disposition; it is tied to the love in our life.

That’s why Elizabeth can barely contain herself, and that’s why when John kicks in her womb, she knows it’s a reaction of joy—because love has come to her home.

Some of you are in a particular stage of life that I am remembering right now. There was a time when our children were small enough that when I came home, it didn’t matter what they were doing, they would stop and come running to the door squealing, “Daddy’s home! Daddy’s home!” I would scoop them up and they would start chattering, “Guess what, Daddy? You know what? Watch this, Daddy.”

Of course, that stage didn’t last forever. Soon enough, I would come home and there was no reaction. There would be no reaction at all; they would move through the house like they were galley slaves, forced by providence to live with the world’s two most embarrassing people.

But that stage doesn’t last forever either. Two summers ago, our son who had lived in New York City for four years moved back to Kansas City. It’s a thing of joy to have a young adult child living in your

zip code.

That’s what it is: joy. And now we have traded roles. When he stops by for dinner or to watch a Chiefs game, it’s like we have switched places. Carol and I are saying, “Nathan’s home! Nathan’s home! Nathan, look what your mom did. Nathan, did I tell you about...? Nathan, come see this.” It is joy because when love comes to the door, joy accompanies. Am I making sense to you?

Mary comes to Elizabeth’s home and Elizabeth explodes in joy, like a little kid, “Mary’s home! Mary’s home!” But Elizabeth knows—and I don’t know how she knows, I don’t care how she knows—but she knows that it’s not just her cousin who has come home but the love of God has found her, too.

I said a few moments ago, that for people of faith, joy can be a fairly constant companion. This is true because the love of God has found you, has searched for you. The whole message of Christmas is that God wants to be where we are.

As some of you know, I’m not the best with pets. I know some of you will find that a spiritual deficiency. I accept that. I’ve told you before, we used to have a cat that lived in our house. Alley cat had lived with us for 15 years or more, but when we moved to Brookside, she realized you could move, so she did. She loved to go outside everyday and one day she just didn’t come home. She moved in with the people down the street. She upgraded. I’m dealing with my grief.

I say this so that you will not, in any fashion, think the following poem is one that I wrote. No, this was written by the far better writer in our family: our daughter, Sarah. I want to read you a poem titled, “What my dog taught me about God.”

I have noticed that when my dog does not know
where I am
she will look for me in every room.
Nose pushed under bed covers, behind doors,
paws patting down the hallway
listening, smelling, seeking
until she hears me
until she sees me
and then she is running my way.

1 David Wythe, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, (2015) p. 128.

Sometimes I think God and I play this same game—
each one of us seeking the other.
So if I can't find God under covers,
behind doors, down the hall or anywhere,
I try to stay still,
because I know God will check every room.
and I know God will never stop seeking me.
The Holy Spirit is running my way.
My dog taught me that.²

The point is really simple today. Christmas means

that the love of God has sought you out. God has
chosen to come to your house, to your life, to this
world. The love of God was born in human history
because God could not bear to stay away. You are
loved by the love that makes sense of the universe
and the love that makes sense of your own life... and
that love has come.

So, even with whatever the bad news will be this
week—and there will be bad news—remember: love
has come and lean into joy. For love has come to
your house. That's the promise of Christmas.

2 Rev. Sarah Are Speed, "What My Dog Taught Me About God" (writingthegood.com)