

# Sermons at Christ Church

## *Building Relationships Through Love.*

*Advent 3*

*Rev. Emmanuel Mercer*

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant"* Mary brims with joy as she hears the greetings of her cousin Elizabeth. Mary's joy is based on two things. First, God is about to do something new. Second, the joy of agency, God is using her as an agent in bringing this new thing to birth. Lowly as she was. Poor as she was. Marginalized as she was. Undesirable as she was. A woman was she was. God used her for God's purpose in a way she never imagined.

As the joy of agency, it appears that God did not consider her station in life as a prerequisite in inviting her to be a part of this new thing God was doing. And that alone evokes an indescribable sense of joy because it tells me that God isn't looking at who we are in order to use us in doing something new.

Advent is the joy of surprises. The first surprise is the joy of believing that God is doing something new in our lives by intervening in our lives. And because God intervenes in our lives, things do not remain the same-our lives and circumstances don't remain the same.

To accept that things remain the same, even when they are terribly bad, is to resign ourselves to the fact that we are sufficient for ourselves-and that to me, smacks of the thumb sucking mentality. Ever seen people suck their thumb? There's this false sense of satisfaction that comes from sucking the thumb. But the fact that people suck their thumb doesn't mean that's enough food for them. The fact that those who suck their thumb go hungry means that our satisfaction doesn't depend on ourselves alone.

Christopher West, a theologian, once said that "Every temptation comes down to this one temptation. The temptation to believe that the satisfaction of the deepest desires of my heart is

totally up to me.” To accept that that isn’t the case is to be open to the idea that I can count on God to do something new in my life.

The second joy of Advent is the joy of agency. And that joy poses Advent’s questions. Advent’s questions are who am I? What am I doing here? What is my purpose? What is it that excites me to the point where I wouldn’t mind spending the rest of my life doing it? What brings me the most joy?

Advent’s joy isn’t necessarily found in the questions but in helping us discern a path where we can find your deepest joy. The joy of agency believes that like Mary, you are open to being agents of God-people whom God uses.

Mark Twain once wrote that “The two most important days in our lives are the day we are born and the day we find out why.” We know our birthdays, and we celebrate those birthdays. Our challenge, however, has always been to find out why we were born, what our purpose is? The joy of Advent is knowing our why, knowing our purpose and knowing that we can be agents of joy-people who bring God’s joy to barren places.

The question of purpose may have been at the back of John’s mind when he sent his disciples to inquire from Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come or we should expect another one.” In other words, who are you? What is your purpose? We know that God is about to do something new, but are you the agent that God promised us?

Jesus’s response was incredibly humbling. He simply asked them to go back and tell John what they see and hear, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Blessed is the one who takes no offence at the new thing that is happening in the lives of people. Go and tell John about the transformation in the lives of people. Go and tell John about the good news which resurrects our dead imaginations. Go and tell John about the mending that is taking place. Go and tell John about the rebirth of society.

One important fact worth pointing out is that Jesus didn't say to John's disciples, go and tell John that people have come to faith, he didn't tell them that people have come to believe in him or memorized the law-no. Jesus simply reflected on the transformation that was going on in the lives of ordinary people who were on the margins of society.

Remember this, it is not enough to say that we believe. Fact is, Jesus doesn't call us to believe, Jesus calls us to follow, Christ Jesus calls us to transform the world because we ourselves have been transformed by the joy of the good news.

The power behind Jesus' words to John is the insight that it provides to us about his ministry. What he meant with his work was about recasting the image of the Messiah from a violent overthrow of the systems of oppression, injustice, degradation, denigration and abuse to an overthrow of these same systems with the violent power of love.

The kind of Messiah Jesus portrays to John isn't one of armed militancy. It is a different kind of Messiah-one who prides himself with militant love, one who leans towards the transformation of human circumstance and situation, one which leans towards turning lives around and making life less difficult. It is a love which believes that things don't have to remain the same and so it celebrates its agency in bringing to birth something new, something life-giving.

Yes, this Messiah's militancy towards human transformation was such that anyone in any condition or situation who encounters him or hears his good news doesn't go away the same. You don't encounter Jesus and remain the same. There's a noticeable change in anyone who encounters Jesus-they too become agents of the joy of transformation.

Today we will baptize Margaret. Margaret is a fifth grader who has impressed me a great deal. A few months ago, I wrote and preached about some profound thoughts that Margaret shared with her mother that it doesn't cost to believe and there's no downside to choosing to believe. However, there's a huge downside to choosing not to believe. Margaret had also believed that only kids got baptized, and it wasn't until she saw an adult- Obinna being baptized that her transformation happened. That sight alone turned Margaret's mind toward her own baptism. Obinna became an agent of Margaret's joy.

Advent's joy is about expressing what we cherish as people of faith-which is love. One of the early Church Fathers, Tertullian of Carthage is reported to have said this about his conversion to Christianity. According to him, *"But they (Christians) demonstrated something I didn't have. The thing that converted me to Christianity was the way that they loved each other."* This claim is so important because it confirms the idea that militant love brings to birth transformed world and lives.

Remember this, the clue to human transformation is our willingness to be amenable to being transformed into who we want to be so we can turn the world into what it needs to be- a haven of deep joy, an oasis of healing and mending, a refuge of love and peace.

Like Mary, we may never understand why God chose us to be agents of joy, but in so far as we believe that the status quo is stifling, God would intervene to turn our lives around-not that we are evil people, but because we need a new perspective on life, we need to see each other and the world in a wholesome redeeming way.

I heard about this burglar who broke into a house one night. Just as he was about to steal the stereo, he heard a voice say 'Jesus is watching you.' He froze in his tracks and shined his flashlight over in the corner and saw a parrot. He said to the parrot, "Did you say that to me?" The parrot said, "Yes, I am just trying to warn you.'

The burglar then said 'Warn me? What are you talking about? Who are you?' The Parrot said, 'My name is Moses.' The burglar laughed and said 'What kind of crazy people would name a parrot Moses?' The parrot said 'The same kind of people that would name a 130- pound rottweiler Jesus.'

The prophet Isaiah reminds us, in so far as formerly hostile environments would be transformed into habitable places with zest for life, so will the circumstances that render our lives barren be transformed-because things don't have to remain the same.

Our individual circumstances may be different but there's a single theme which runs through each life-God cares about that life and that's why God always dares to save each life because we cannot save ourselves by ourselves alone.

Listen to William Gouge-a Puritan clergyman “I being a great sinner, comfort myself in a great savior. When I look upon myself, I see nothing but weakness and emptiness: but when I look upon Christ, I see nothing but sufficiency and fullness.”

Advent is about celebrating the God who makes all things new through the joy of human agency. The joy of human agency rests on the fact that if we do not create or be agents of creating a better world and life, nothing is going to happen.

Our unique challenge this Advent is to walk to Elizabeth’s house and any house with the improbable story of the good news that God has intervened in the lives of God’s people and has made us agents of joyful transformation. This Advent, we too can sing like Mary, we can sing like Margaret, and we sing, not only because we are happy, but because we are free, free enough to be agents who bring to birth God’s new earth.

**Amen.**