

## **I Believe in God**

December 13, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Luke 1:26-38**

Today we are continuing our Advent series based on a poem titled “I Believe” – a rich and powerful poem filled with hope and love and joy and peace – all of those great Advent themes – even in the face of darkness and pain and despair.

*“I believe in the sun,” the poem goes, “even when it’s not shining.  
I believe in love, even when I don’t feel it.  
I believe in God, even when God is silent.”*

As we have learned, this poem was scratched into the wall of a Jewish hideout in the middle of Nazi Germany during WWII and stands as a powerful reminder of the strength and the resilience of God’s people.

Two weeks ago we spent some time with the first line – I believe in the sun, even when it’s not shining – and we talked about the Advent theme of hope – of light that shines in even the darkest darkness – the light of God that refuses to leave us alone in total and complete darkness, but that lights our path, showing us a way when it feels like there is no way.

Last week we entered into the second Advent theme – Love. “I believe in love, even when I don’t feel it.” And we were reminded that the steadfast love of God is so powerful, and so enduring that nothing – *nothing* – can separate us from it. And even in those times and spaces in our lives when we are having a hard time feeling or receiving or expressing love, the love of God is still right here with us, working as hard as it ever has.

This week is an interesting week. Because our Advent theme this week is Joy. This is the week that we light the pink advent candle. All of the purple candles have a little bit more of a somber, penitential feel. But in this third Sunday of Advent we break from that and light the “happy candle” – at least, that’s what my daughter (the lover of all things pink) would call it. And we open our eyes to a great and powerful joy. We read the story of the angel appearing to Mary, and for the first time this Advent we are off and rolling in the Christmas story. Jesus’ birth is imminent. Mary is expecting. And as Mary prepares herself to welcome the son of God into the world, we prepare our hearts and homes once again to celebrate his birth.

But there is another side to this week – this week of joy, and gladness, and expectation. And that’s the theme we get to in our third line of the poem: “I believe in God, even when God is silent.”

That's not really a line fit for a pink "happy candle," is it? It's not bubbling up or brimming over with joy. In fact, it's just the opposite. It's making the choice to believe, even in the times when the joy of God's presence – the joy of Emmanuel – God with us – seems really, really far away.

So today we are faced with this tension. Joy, and sorrow. Expectation, and disappointment. A deep and abiding faith, side-by-side with the lingering question "How can this be?"

It's a tension that I think probably most of us are feeling, at least to some degree, this year. On the one hand, it's less than two weeks until Christmas – that holiday that is marked with lights and gifts and joy. There is a certain magic about this season – certainly if you are a kid that magic is there, or if you have kids, experiencing Christmas again through their eyes – but I think for all of us, this feast day in the middle of winter; this reminder of the greatest gift of all time – the gift of God's self, come into the world at just that moment that we needed it the most. It's hard not to feel at least a little joy around Christmas.

But then, we have this year. Some of you are feeling the grief over the loss of a loved one really profoundly right now. The empty chair at the table starts to feel especially big around the holidays. And sometimes that joy feels a long way away. That joy is also a little bit – or a lot – harder to tap into this year when we know that so much of what we treasure about Christmas – so many of those time-honored traditions are changing this year, or taking a backseat, due to COVID. We are tired, and frustrated, and we really need that joy right about now, but it is getting increasingly hard to find.

So this tension, between joy and sadness; between excitement and frustration; between trust in God's presence with us and what sometimes feels like God's silence – this is a very real tension that more than a few of us are living with this year.

But let me let you in on a little secret: This tension may feel strong this year, but it's not a new thing. In fact, it is so common that there is actually a word for it. Liminal.

Liminal is a space between spaces. It might be a transitional space – when we are moving from one thing to the next, but here, in this moment, we are in that weird in-between. One thing has stopped, and the next thing hasn't started yet, and we're stuck here in a kind-of "now what?" For the Israelites, the wilderness was their primary liminal space. Egypt was behind them, and the Promised Land was in front of them, and now they were living in a wide-open unknown. And it was so scary and so uncomfortable that they decided to build and worship a golden calf to make them feel like they had some control. The liminal spaces don't always bring out the best in us – but they always reveal something deep within us – and they form us and shape us, even though the process is usually deeply uncomfortable.

The three days between the death and the resurrection was another classic liminal space. Jesus had died, but he had not yet risen. And in the meantime, the disciples are all huddled together, scared, in the upper room, just waiting for that knock on the door – afraid that they would be the next ones to get hauled off to their death. The liminal – the space of the unknown – the space of waiting – can be hard.

So that's one way of looking at liminal. The Oxford Dictionary also describes Liminal as "occupying space at, or on both sides, of a boundary or threshold." As in, having one foot firmly planted in joy, and the other, deeply in sorrow, and feeling both, fully, at the same time.

When the angel appears to Mary and tells her that she is going to conceive, on one hand Mary is overjoyed. The joy is so palpable, and so contagious, that even her unborn nephew leaps for joy in his mother's womb. The joy simply cannot be contained. But on the other hand, we are told that she is "perplexed." Confused. She's got questions. She doesn't fully trust the angel who brings her such a strange greeting, and she asks the angel the very question that any one of us would have asked if we were a young teenage girl – a virgin no less – who had just been told that we were with child, and the father was God. "Um...come again? I mean, I don't mean to question you, but...this isn't quite making sense. Did I sleep through that day in health class when they told us where babies come from, because I don't remember this being part of the conversation."

Well, loose translation. Mary was a lot more concise. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

It's that space between pure joy, and deep questions. It's that space where, on one hand our hearts soar with hope and love and joy and peace, when we look at the angel or the star sitting on top of the beautifully-decorated Christmas tree with carols playing in the background and a nativity scene depicting that perfectly-picturesque first Christmas night. But then on the other hand the "how can this be" and the "how long will this go on" and the "why does the grief hurt so much" and the "God, why don't you just step in and fix everything already" echoes in the back of our minds.

Advent is a deeply-liminal space. It's a space of waiting, of hoping, of wandering, even – waiting for the gift of Christ's birth. Waiting for the second coming. Waiting for good news. Waiting for the Promised Land. Waiting for Jesus to appear on this side of the locked door. Waiting for a vaccine. Waiting for the darkness to lift.

And it is also a time when we stand right smack between the joy and the mess. Between the good news that God is with us and...the rest of life.

Even on that first Christmas, that tension...that liminal space...was palpable.

On the one hand, Jesus was born. Yay! Joy to the world! The hope of the world – the savior of the world – God incarnate – had come. Joy was born. The world would never be the same again. The shepherds come and worship him. The wise men come and bring him gifts. Angels appear and announce his birth.

But we also know that when Jesus was born, not everything was sunshine and roses. It wasn't exactly the scene of a Norman Rockwell painting. Because when joy became incarnate on that first Christmas night, it did not come to a world that was perfect and whole. Jesus was born to an unwed mother. In a barn, because the Innkeeper couldn't be bothered to help a teenage girl in labor. They didn't have any baby blankets, so Jesus was wrapped in rags. And laid in a feed trough. The only baby shower that Mary got was one that was given by astrologers and fortune tellers – well-meaning dudes, but they brought costly perfumes when what Mary really needed at that moment was diapers and blankets. And to top it off, the king was so insecure and felt so threatened by a baby born to a nobody that he ordered a mass killing of all the baby and toddler boys in the kingdom.

That first Christmas was a mess. Mary was a mess. Add to it all her surging postpartum hormones and her adolescent brain and I can just imagine her huddled up in the corner in tears, sobbing that “this wasn't how it was supposed to be. And I just want to go home and be with my family, but if I go home King Herod is going to kill him, so I am stuck here with my newborn who won't latch and this frankincense is making my allergies go wild, and I didn't even have allergies two weeks ago before I gave birth but now it seems like everything about my body has changed and my life has changed and I'm in a strange place and all I want to do is go home, but I can't.

Joy, mixed with messiness. Expectation, mingled with uncertainty. Delight, paired with disappointment. That is the Advent story. The story of us as a people watching, and waiting, and expecting, and preparing for the hope and love and joy and peace that we so desperately need right now. It's the story of us choosing faith – choosing to believe – choosing, along with Mary, to open ourselves up to the promise that the Angel brings, even when we have more questions than we have answers.

I believe in God, even when he is silent.

Even when case counts rise and restrictions increase and plans fall through.

Even when disappointment and grief get in the way.

Even when we are tired, exhausted, frustrated.

Even when we are having a hard time seeing the silver lining in much of anything.

I believe. I believe in a God who comes to earth, to be born into the messiness and into the confusion. And that this God, even in the mess, brings us a deep and abiding joy.