



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**“Gritty Good News of Great Joy”**

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 10-11, John 1:6-9, 19-28  
Will Sparks                      December 14, 2014**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

“Are you expecting?” There’s a potent question if I ever heard one. To Kerry, now in her 24th week, that question comes in many forms. The other day, someone, curious but unsure how to ask, came up to her and said, “How’s all that going?” As you heard, it is going well and we rejoice with her as week follows week and the reality of a new life becomes more and more evident and real and significant.

We are in a time of waiting and expecting during the season of Advent. And with Mary the center of attention I want to play with the idea of pregnancy this morning, because it is such a word and concept and experience full of hope and emotion and power. The world God made, the human community God loves, pregnant with possibility.

However, I have learned that pregnancy talk can be hard if you are longing for a child and are unable. You will know too closely what expecting without resolution feels like. Or if you have experienced miscarriage, you will know all too well how hard expectations can fall.

However, I have also learned in life not to jump to the joy- to rejoicing too soon when someone says, I am pregnant. A new life is a good thing, but sometimes it comes at a price, sometimes it requires it requires much of us. New life can turn your life upside down.

I was just 23 years old when news of the coming arrival of my first child was delivered to me. And I would not be the person I am today were it not for the immeasurable gift of my children that that announcement heralded. I would never change a thing, because I am so deeply and so richly blessed. At the same time that news took me by a storm, knocked me off my feet. I was young, and fit, and full of exciting plans and dreams. And into this unfettered world came news, news of a pregnancy, of a coming child. It was a process for me to recognize and let go of the things that would no longer be, in order to make some room for the joy of accepting the new life that was now on its way, and was the most incredible gift of God.

You see, this morning we lit the candle of joy, and this is a season of joy. We celebrate that God is coming to us, and God's advent among us and within us makes all the difference in our lives. We rejoice. We are expecting and Isaiah makes clear exactly what to expect. This is good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind. Isaiah proclaims new life, deep life, abundant life on its way. "Comfort all who mourn, provide for those who grieve, give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, praise instead of despair." Uplifting eh? You can feel the joy rise with these words. And there is John the Baptist calling for people to repent and the leaders come to him and want clarification. Who do you think you are? And his response is basically, I am just the opening act. The one coming after me, that is the real revolutionary. I baptize with water. Other gospels say he will baptize with the Holy Spirit which is fire. Joy, yes, and huge change. If the poor are lifted, the hungry fed, the oppressed set free, this is revolution, a great turning, and frankly, it will take some getting used to.

Think for a second, about the moments in your life that have led you to the biggest changes in who you are, the things that have changed your person the most. Those are soul changing moments. For me it is clearly the births, the discoveries at least as much as the losses

and the endings. All are key moments when everything changes. And when I think about that key moment, at the time, I never could have imagined all that it would later mean to me. I never could have planned for my life to be changed by the birth of a child. I never could have planned for a childhood disability and the way that it would affect things. I never could have expected the losses in my life have affected me.

When the leaders come to John for clarification, they're guessing about him right? Are you Elijah? Another prophet? And that is so often true for us. In so many ways, my life is beyond me, I am over my head, that any attempt to be in control is futile. Most of the time, the full magnitude of the changes in our lives can only be seen clearly in hindsight.

But in the 21st century, we like to be planners. We have the ability to decide when it is time for a child to be born and when it is time to avoid that new life- not just yet thanks. And that is a good thing. What we cannot control is the way life will change us. We cannot control the way a child will revolutionize our life, the way a change will turn our world upside down. The Pharisees coming to John wanted to clarify the change he was proclaiming. They are trying to understand what is coming. And basically his response is, "oh dear. Poor things. You have no idea, do you. You don't know the half of it." And when it comes to pregnancy, to expecting, to the big changes that come, one of us do.

But in faith, we, like Mary and Joseph, like John and all the others, come to the point when we realize our life is beyond control, and we simply have to open to the change. Ready or not, here it comes. The path that leads to the place in which we, like Mary, can say "let it be according to your word" is a gritty, emotion filled, sometimes rocky path, but it is a path we must take over and over again in life- a path of letting go, of saying, "ok God. You're right. I don't know the half of it, but here we go." These are the times when we must learn one of the most significant lessons in the human journey- one that only comes to us when we realize that our life is not controllable, the path of the soul is not controllable.

I had a friend in my settlement charge of Arrow lakes named Betty Williams. Betty was 78 when I moved there. She was one of 9 children born and raised in Nakusp, the 9th of which came 6 years after the 8th. Betty's mother was either pregnant or nursing for over 2 decades. She was familiar with good news of great joy, again, and again, and again. Betty's mother once said in response to the earth-shaking news of another child on the way, when you think your resources are well stretched already and you wonder how you will make room on your heart for another, "They each bring love with them. They each come with a love of their own."

There was no way for Mary to know, even with the ministrations of the angels, the full extent of the love, and pain and transformation that this child would bring with him. There is no way for any of us to know what kind of possibility will come with any of the curves our lives take. But as Daniel Berrigan once said, "We stand on the brink of the unknown. Which is to say that things are normal, and good, and permissive of joy." "May it be so, God, according to your word." Amen