

December 20th, 2020

**Luke 1:26-45 “Love Is an Unexpected Gift”
Advent 2020 Week 4**

The world can be noisy sometimes. This is true for people who live in big cities. As I told you a few weeks ago, I’ve never lived in a big city. Chico and Lynchburg, Virginia are the most “urban” places I’ve ever lived. But I remember the first time I spent the night in a real, honest to goodness city. I think it was maybe Reno, Nevada, which isn’t terribly big, but it’s about twice the size of Eugene, Oregon which was the only city I knew about. I just remember how noisy it was. Of course, it’s a casino town, so naturally there’s going to be a lot of lights and noise even at night. But it wasn’t until I stayed in a city like San Francisco that I truly understood how noisy a city can be. Horns honking, sirens blaring, traffic at all hours of the night. I wondered how people could sleep. I was told you get used to it. So yeah, the world can be noisy, but not just for people who live in cities. For some, the noise doesn’t come in the form of cars, sirens or crowds of people. For some folks, the noise comes from inside. Especially if you deal with anxiety or even depression.

Ever lie in bed at night and you can’t get your brain to turn off? Maybe you’re brain keeps playing something over and over in your head in an endless loop. Maybe it’s something you said that you wish you hadn’t said. Maybe it’s an angry exchange with someone ... family, boss, kids, spouse. Maybe it’s something that’s worrying you or threatening your security. A layoff at work. Being behind in the rent or mortgage. Wondering if you’re ever going to make it through the semester at school. Whether you’ve chosen a career with some semblance of stability. Whether your kids will grow up to be successful. Whether you’ve got the right skills to keep up with your job. Wondering if you’ll ever be able to retire. “Am I okay? Am I good enough? When will I get over this grief I’m experiencing? When am I going to stop feeling so lonely and empty? When am I going to be able to slow down enough to

catch my breath again and get my life together?” Again ... the world can be noisy sometimes.

A few weeks ago, when I was preparing for this Sunday, I was reading a reflection that Andra Moran wrote about a podcast she listens to hosted by Cara Bradley. It's called "The Power of Pause." The episode, if you want to listen to it, is #95, called "On the Verge." Bradley talked about how starved some of us are for stillness. Quite often, our lives are so noisy that we constantly find ourselves in a heightened state of fretfulness. Her solution? Practice pauses. When it feels like we are on the verge of not being able to take another moment of internal or external noise, she calls on her listeners to take a moment to just "be." And I know this sounds kind of ... "out there" but let me walk you through what it means to "be" this morning. I think my spiritual director frames it a little better. She calls it "the practice of being present." But you've got to be willing to hit your "pause" button in order to practice being present. It honestly takes quite a bit of discipline to do this, but when you start seeing the good results, it becomes more natural.

In her podcast, Cara Bradley goes on to say that when we take time to pause and be present, consider the potential for joy in that moment. When you're tired, pausing allows you to rest. When you're feeling stressed, pausing allows you to experience calm. When you're angry, pausing allows you to turn that internal adrenaline faucet down a few notches, or even turn it off completely. When you're feeling doubtful, pausing and being present allows for the *Spirit's* presence to catch up to you.

Let's look at this passage from Luke's gospel again. This is the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her encounter with the Angel Gabriel. Luke said that she was a virgin, engaged to a man named Joseph. Out of the blue, the angel Gabriel says, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you!" Luke says she was "perplexed" and pondered on what this greeting was all about. That makes sense. Most anyone would feel perplexed if an angel just came out of nowhere and said what Gabriel

said. Then Gabriel said, “Don’t be afraid.” That right there might turn the perplexity knob up a notch or two. “Why would you say, ‘don’t be afraid?’ Why should I be?” Then Gabriel gives her the news. God has found favor with you, and will cause you to conceive and bear a son. Oh, and you’ll name him Jesus and God’s going to place him on the throne of your ancestor David, and he’ll rule forever and ever. Let’s see ... young virgin woman is all of a sudden going to be pregnant by divine means, and she’s going to have to explain herself to her husband-to-be, her family, and her community. I’d say that’s enough to tip you over from perplexity into anxiety. But remember what she did back in verse 29. She *was* perplexed, but she also *pondered*. Or to put it another way, she *paused*. She grounded herself in the present. And she said, “yes.” More specifically, she said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Trivia for the day – This story is what inspired the Beatles to write their hit song “Let it Be.”

The mother of Jesus, the child who would bear the sins of the world, the one who would be called, “God come in human flesh” ... she *paused*. And as she took the time to become present in the moment, she was able to experience joy. Not fear. Not, “What are people going to think?” Not, “Will my husband to be reject me?” or “Will my community cast me out?” She experienced *joy*.

Here’s the thing: joy isn’t cartwheels and confetti and candy-making. In fact joy recognizes that pausing and reflecting and pondering may lead to a trembling ‘yes’ as we hold each other in the space of what joy looks like and feels like when the world feels like it’s unraveling or breaking apart. That is an unexpected joy that fills us, moves us and allows us to be the agents of God in these days. May we, at the close of this advent season, stop ... pause ... ponder ... and reflect. May we be open to the possibility that joy might just break through some of that noise and clutter that keeps us from being fully present in each moment.

How do we do this? Or maybe the better question would be, “What can we do to remind us to be fully present and be open to joy?”

On a table set out two empty frames (glass and backing removed, one labeled “suffering” and the other labeled “joy”), Squares of paper, Pens,

Think back to a painful experience in your life. Write a word, phrase or symbol to remember this experience and place it in the frame marked “suffering.” Ask yourself these questions about that painful time: Did any learning result within you? What was the yield from this time? Did you feel God’s presence in your suffering? How? If your answers merit it, lift the frame of suffering and replace it with the frame of joy.

Offer a prayer to God for seeing you through your pain and for the growth that was yielded.

This is not a glib self-help exercise of simple reframing; this is deep work; gospel work!