

Practicing Joy (Luke 1:39-45)
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First Baptist Church, Jefferson City MO
The Third Sunday of Advent
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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/practicing-joy/>

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "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. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

There are two meanings that define what we're doing this morning. We are here to worship God *and* we're here to celebrate the amazing ministry of Rod Maples whose ministry here has been long and rich and cause for joy. This is a tender moment in which we feel sadness that Rod is leaving us, but also we give thanks to God for him and Sherry and their warm relationship we've all enjoyed.

But what, you may ask, what does this day of celebration about Rod's quarter-century of ministry in this church have anything to do with Mary and Elizabeth's meeting together? Luke, in his amazing birth pageant, presents these two nobodies, two country girls who were cousins, who happened to be pregnant at the same time, these two mothers of two amazing sons in the drama of God's salvation?

Mary walked into her cousin's home and the infant inside Elizabeth jumped with joy. It was a startling moment that was interpreted as a sign of what was to come. Mary and Elizabeth were both wide-eyed with wonder and they huddled together in joy and amazement at what God was doing in their simple, humble lives. Both had a strategic role to play in the holy drama God was planning through the two baby boys they were bearing. Pregnancy creates an overwhelming sense of wonder and imagination for what is happening and what will occur. No doubt most mothers and fathers (and grandparents) can understand this explosion of anticipation.

Today, we too are wide-eyed in amazement at how we've been blessed by the ministry of Rod's faithful attention to the worship of God in the midst of a generation of liminal events. Rod's time with us reminds us of all the magic moments that have occurred over the years ... our time together of the years with Doyle, Melissa, and Rod, and the glorious memories they have created with us. Rod's leaving is another reminder to us of how blessed we have been with

their steady leadership and how our task now is to find the faith to embrace the future and not remain stuck.

Melissa's meditation from yesterday reminds us, "This Advent, we are immersed in the liminal space for our church where we don't know the end of the story. We are on the journey from what was—pre-Covid, fully staffed—to what is next. This is not a wasted season. Instead, God extends an invitation for us to be refined in the waiting. To trust God is at work, present with us, ahead of us, preparing and leading our church into a new chapter in our long, beautiful narrative."¹ The prophet Isaiah said ... *See, I am doing a new thing! (When) it springs up; (will) you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*²

History is filled with strange colleagues and uncommon friendships. One of those occurred last century with two titans of modern theology. The two titans were Karl Barth, professor at the University of Basel; the other was Rudolf Bultmann, professor at the University of Marburg. [I have a collection of the personal letters between them that shows both their human and scholarly sides. It's their tender friendship that stands out in the letters.]

On December 28, 1963, Barth wrote Bultmann to describe he had recently seen a nativity painting by Sandro Botticelli he had never seen before. In it he described that on the upper panel of the painting in which the angels were dancing and singing, "*Glory to God in the highest.*" In the middle panel, commanding the focus of attention, were Joseph, Mary, the child, the oxen and the asses, and down below in the lowest panel were 3 couples embracing one another, with one of the couples consisting of two really old gentlemen joyously smiling at one another and saying to one another, "*Peace on earth.*" Barth shared with Bultmann he wished they could think of themselves as the 2 men in the painting, sharing in the joy of the marvel and wonder of the blessed nativity. Imagine that! These two formally-trained giants of theology simply wished to be the two old men who embraced one another in their devotion to the Christ child!

That's the spirit of our worship today. We gather around the nativity in hushed quiet, simply to adore the newborn king. We're all here today to recognize our common need to stand awestruck around the manger and to look upon the baby as the incarnation of God's boundless love. And because of that, in this year known as yet another very weird year filled with sorrows and suffering, we can look upon the baby boy with joy and give thanks! Our hearts are full and we give thanks to God for the partnership we've experienced in worship with Rod, *singing songs and hymns and spiritual songs* together over the years.

Our joy is full and we give thanks to God for this Advent season and in gratitude for our dear friend Rod Maples.

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¹ Melissa Hatfield, "Waiting Provides Transition", Advent Meditation, FBC, Jefferson City MO, 12/11/21

² Isaiah 43:19, New International Version