

Luke 1:39-55

It's bedtime. The little girl picks out the book she wants her dad to read. It's the same book she picks every night. Yet as the father reads, the joy and excitement of the little girl are as if she was hearing it for the first time! She knows the story, she knows what's coming on the next page, yet each time it seems like a new question is sparked, or a new word is learned. Every time there is renewed joy and excitement over hearing the same old story.

How many times have you heard the Christmas story? 15 times, 27 times, 67 times? Is it becoming the same old story over and over again? You know what's on the next page, Epiphany, then Lent, then Easter. But I guarantee you that even though it's the same old story, you will have a whole new perspective on it now than you did last year, five years ago, especially twenty years ago! Is it the same old story for you this year, or are you looking forward to experiencing it anew after all that you have been through in the past year. As we look ahead to Christmas this week, let's renew our joy in hearing that same old story. And in hearing once again the joy of Christ's first coming, let's renew our joy in waiting expectantly for his second coming.

So why is it that we seem to lose our joy at times? Why is it that Christmas, Easter, or even just any old Sunday becomes our duty rather than our joy? Well, it's the same thing over and over again. We will sing some songs, hear some Bible readings, and sit through a sermon where pastor is going to point out a human flaw and then heal it with the gospel. Every 1st and 3rd Sunday of the month there will be communion. It's that same thing over and over again, and certainly I'm not missing much if I can't make it for one Sunday... or two... or... I'll get there soon. There's no big rush, I mean, church will always be there. Besides, I know the stories so well. Just tell me what story the sermon will be based on and I can think of that story in my mind – it's pretty much the same thing right? Oh, and Christmas is coming up! Yes, I know it is going to be a special service that will be a change from the regular Sunday worship... but I know that story too well. I've been reciting it since I was a little child: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world... So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David... And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby keeping watch over their flocks at night... Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel..." (Luke 2). Is that all that church has become to you? Hearing the same stories over and over again? If so, then it's no wonder that his Story has lost its luster.

God makes it clear that hearing the Story 1,000 times isn't too much. And we at times get tired of it after 15, 20, or even 60 times. God first made the promise of Christmas to Adam and Eve in the garden after the fall. They repeated it to their children, who in turn repeated it to theirs. Just to name a few, God repeated the well-known promise of Christmas to Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and Micah. These promises were repeated generation after generation, and God added new light to the Christmas promise every time he gave it. Through Micah he said, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel" (Mic 5:2). For millennia the Israelites longed for and eagerly awaited their Messiah. It's much like waiting to open a gift that you already know you are going to receive! With excitement you may research and look into it even more. You may tell all your friends about your gift and how happy you are about it. And certainly you will make sure you are all ready to use the gift! Yes, it's the same old promise of the Savior, it's the same old story of Christmas, it's the same waiting for heaven that you hear about Sunday after Sunday – but it's a gift that you know you are going to receive. It's the one gift unlike any other! Renew your joy in hearing about this gift and your excitement in waiting for it.

But it's difficult to just say, "Ok, my joy is renewed" and expect an inner change. Take a look at the gospel reading and see how Elizabeth and Mary were renewed in joy. "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Lk 1:41). Real joy and excitement was created simply by being in the presence of the Savior. Baby John leaped for joy in the womb! Real joy and excitement was created by the Holy Spirit as it filled Elizabeth and she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:42-43). Elizabeth praised God for what he has done with Mary, and Elizabeth too felt honored to be visited by such a special guest. Moreover, Mary herself was moved to song as she proclaimed the famous Magnificat for the first time – the Song of Mary!

Real changes in the heart, real joy and excitement is created by being in the presence of the Savior, by the Holy Spirit filling your heart, and by gathering with fellow believers to share your joy! Coming Sunday after Sunday, hearing that same old Christmas story once again is all about experiencing the truths of God in a new light – you have had new experience every year, and because of that, you will experience God's Story in a new way. It's about filling your well even more with treasures old and new. It's about gathering with believers to share burdens and joys. Most importantly, hearing that same old Story is one of the ways in which the Holy

Spirit fills your heart and works in you to make impossible changes within. He strengthens your faith, he takes your burdens, fills you with joy, and helps you overcome even the greatest hardships.

Renewed joy comes from the Holy Spirit, and it's a contagious thing! Renewed joy goes out to all generations.

Perhaps you aren't getting tired of the same old Story, that's good! But it sure has been a long time since Christ came, ascended into heaven and promised he would return. Why can't he just come already? What is he waiting for? Why is he so slow to come? We may at times even falter a bit and wonder, is he even coming? Well, God hasn't broken any of his promises yet. And it was roughly 4,000 years from the first promise of the Savior until he actually came the first time. Don't grow impatient with God's timeframe – he will keep his promise. In various places in the Bible, heaven is depicted as a banquet feast which God wants to be filled. So what about the child to be born in that Christian home in just under a year's time? What about the man who will finally give his life a second thought when he is on his deathbed, or the friend who is still struggling with the idea of sin and grace? Should God just end the world right now and lose those whom he has elected since the beginning? The Apostle Peter wrote, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pt 3:9). God knows his timeline, he is coming just as he promised. So continue to wait expectantly for him!

In Mary's song of praise, we can see the far reaching promise of God. She says, "From now on all generations will call me blessed" (Lk 1:48), "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation" (Lk 1:50), and "to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors" (Lk 1:55). God's patience and mercy is far reaching, extending from our ancestors to generation after generation in the future! And this isn't just boring repetition of God's love to all generations. See how God gave Old Testament believers something to look forward to and anticipate. And he gave them the covenants, sacrifices, and festivals all foreshadowing that promise! To those living at the time of Christ, he allowed them to see, hear, even touch their Savior in the flesh! What a privilege that must have been! But to you and me, he has given the full revelation of his Word. We can hear again the promises from ancient times, see through the eyes of scripture our Savior, and understand more fully what all this means as the apostles explain to us the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection, his teachings, and prophecies about him. We even get glimpses of heaven from the prophet Ezekiel and John's Revelation! Yes it's the same old Story, but told in a new way every time, and experienced in new ways as we go through different stages of life and different experiences. What's more, with a new perspective on the same old Story, we may be able to better share it with those who need to hear it.

Be glad and rejoice that God has been patient with you! Be glad and rejoice as the Holy Spirit works in you through the Word once again. See Bethlehem and that tiny baby in a new light this year. Look up to the heavens as you wait for Christ to come again and thank God for his patience! Then use the time that has given you to tell the Story to others. Tell it to your children and their children. Tell it to friends who have not yet heard. Bring them with you on Sunday and I guarantee you will hear the same old Story in a new way as you try to relate it to your friend or family member.

Finally, I ask you this: Is it the same old story again and again, or are we in the midst of one action packed thriller? You know those movies where the hero is reaching out from the helicopter for that last survivor as the fire rages and the tanks in the plant are about to blow? Tear back the veil of this life and see God reaching out for every last survivor. It's an intense and urgent scene with you right in the middle of it! The clock is ticking down... Do you wish the helicopter would just leave and take you to safety now that you are safely onboard? Or do you wish it would wait moments longer. Who are those that you hope God is waiting for. Who do you know still on that burning building? Pray that God would reach out to them, as he did for you. Reach out to them yourself knowing that God is with you. Bring them to safety. Bring them to hear the Story of how they have been saved. For some, it might be the first time they heard it.