

From Your Bishop: LIVING WITH EXPECTATION AND FINDING JOY

As I return to the Northern Illinois Conference for another year, I wish you an early Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I look to next year expecting God to break into our lives to save our world and give us hope. I expect God to give us joy as we follow the way of Jesus.

Yes, I know the times are hard. They were hard when Jesus was born. Israel had been waiting a long time for a Savior. God seemed so distant. When Matthew interpreted the birth of Jesus, he remembered Isaiah's (7:14) prophecy almost 735 years earlier:



*"All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, And they shall name him Emmanuel...' which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." Matthew 1:22-25 (NRSV)*

A child, born of a virgin, called Emmanuel—"God with us." What a surprise! What joy! Of course, Mary and Joseph both needed angels to see the joy in such a situation.

Joy is often born of sorrow or pain or fear as a gift. At the time, Mary—and certainly Joseph—were more afraid than filled with joy. She was a virgin—who would believe that? He took her as his wife—wondering, trusting—but had no marital relations. They had no money, or home, or security—only faith.

Jesus usually comes to us in situations where we are not in control, when "our way" is not working. Advent is a time to wait for that which we cannot see. Do you remember being a child waiting for Christmas to come? I imagine you did not like the waiting, but the anticipation and excitement opened your heart to a wonder you have never forgotten. Perhaps that is why Jesus said you must become like a child to experience the kingdom of God.

I remember waiting for our three sons to be born. During that time, I learned that "expectation" is not the same as "hoping." To "hope" means to wish for something that we are not sure is going to happen. When we "expect" something, we are sure it is going to happen. That is why a woman with child is not said to be "hoping"; she is said to be "expecting!"

As Elaine and I began to prepare for the big event, we purchased baby furniture, looked for baby clothes, and bought food and toys. I practiced or pretended to put them to bed and kiss them good night, even before they were born! My world changed as I waited and anticipated. The fruit of living with expectation was a birth that was not without struggle but filled with joy and everlasting love.

Expectation changes our lives because we live in a new reality even before it arrives. Our faith is much the same way. We live in the reality of that first Christmas and continue to live each new day expectantly. Christ not only comes to us on Christmas Day, but every time we open our hearts, change our lives, share our faith, and serve our neighbor.

Ultimately joy—like hope, love, and peace—is a gift. God surprises us with the birth of a special child not to terrify us and run us away but to bring us closer, evoke our love and admiration, and give us joy. As you look forward to Christmas and the New Year, slow down and live with expectation again. Pay attention to what God wants to be born into your world again. Act like a child. Look for the joy in expectation. Listen for the angels. Do not miss the miracles!