

**Sermon**  
**St. Mary's Nanoose**  
**December 11, 2016; 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent**  
**Matthew 11:2-11**

How often do our assumptions and expectations blind us to the reality at hand?

How many of you have heard of Jean Vanier? He is the son of the former Governor General, Georges Vanier. Just over 50 years ago, he welcomed two men with disabilities into his home and since then L'Arche has become an international network creating homes and communities all over the world where people with differing abilities live together and support each other. On Vancouver Island I know of 2 such communities: in Victoria and in Comox. (if you're interested I think Trefor can tell you more).

I think it was Jean Vanier who told this story:  
One day he had a media person come to do an interview with him. They were sitting in his office in the L'Arche community where he lived when a young man with an intellectual disability came in. Jean said, "I'm busy now," but the young man wanted a hug so Jean gave him a hug. Mid-hug, they started to laugh. So they hugged and laughed. After a minute or two, Jean patted the young man on the back and told him it was time to go. The young man left. Still chuckling, Jean turned to the interviewer, who said, "It's so tragic, isn't it?"

Today is the third Sunday in Advent and our theme is JOY.

In our gospel reading we hear about John, sitting in prison, mulling over the recent events and hearing, via the grapevine, what Jesus is up to. This is not what he was expecting the Messiah to be like. No one was. They were expecting a leader, a king to lead them out of oppression, to free them from Roman rule. They were expecting someone who could make the world right once again.

Is John feeling doubt? Has it all been worth it? After all, he is sitting jail and things are not looking good for him. He sends his disciples to Jesus. At John's request, they ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Listen to Jesus' answer: "Go and tell John what you hear and see." In other words, Jesus doesn't testify or try to persuade or convince. He tells John's disciples to describe what they've witnessed: the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking again, the lepers being healed and deaf regaining their hearing, the dead being resurrected and the poor; encouraged. In creative writing, this is called "describe, don't tell." Give evidence and let the person reading or hearing can draw their own conclusions.

And then Jesus says, "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." The Greek word used here, translated as "offense" really means resistance, or a state of unbelief. So in essence, Jesus is saying that having witnessed the wonder of his work in the world, those who acknowledge and don't deny what they've seen, will be blessed or changed by it.

When we truly acknowledge something, we accept and integrate it and we *are* changed. We just have to think of Mary in the wonderful canticle we just recited together. Once she decides to respond to the angel's request whole-heartedly, she is filled with joy and spontaneously praises God. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." She accepts God's action; God's wisdom in choosing her even though it seems impossible, and she willingly engages with God in God's plan for the world."

When we stop taking offense at God, when we stop resisting, when name our doubt and offer it up, we are promised new life.

We often do not expect the new life to show up as it does. In fact, we rarely do. We cling to our own ideas, our own plans. But in today's readings it becomes imminently clear that while we are looking outside, like John the Baptist, for God to make the changes we think are necessary, Jesus arrives to meet us in our time and place of need. The arrival of God is internal, not external.

God arrives through an internal process of pregnancy, gestation and birth; not riding on a warhorse to lead his people to battle. This is not what we assumed would happen; this is not what we expect!

But if we do keep our ears and eyes open to how God arrives in our lives, our response will be joy. We have a couple more weeks to wait, but like all expectant parents, we can assume that we will be overcome with joy at the arrival of our saviour.

Because unlike John the Baptist, we know more of the story than he did. From our place in history, we know that Jesus lived, died

and was resurrected. Do we accept the blessing of Christ in our lives? To what extent have we let that reality in?

Shawnigan Lake is the snow capital of Vancouver Island, I think. At the height, or should I say, the *depth* of the snowstorm this past week we had over a foot of snow. On Friday, I stood out on my porch under sunny skies, looking at a glistening white wonderland. It was profoundly quiet and I was gazing on the scene with soft eyes. The call of a crow broke the silence and I focused in time to see the black bird, in contrast with the snow, land on the very tip of a very tall fir tree. The crow's landing stirred the snow on that top branch and the dusting of snow fell to the branches below. Gently shaking those branches, the snow continued to fall and dismantle increasing showers of snow until many seconds later, a substantial curtain of snow fell to the ground, rising up like dust as it hit.

The scene made me think of Jesus, being born to a woman in a small village in the east 2000 years ago. A small event with profound impact that is still reverberating through time, beyond time, and around the world.

We too can have that impact. When we allow ourselves to receive the blessing so freely offered by God, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Jesus continues to walk in, with and through us, blessing the world. And our response will be joy when we finally take in the profundity of this reality.

Joy is how our hearts respond to love. Joy is what draws others near and makes them curious about the gospel message. Joy is what converts hearts. And joy is contagious.

At the recent Regional meeting where I gave a mini workshop on Compassionate Communication, for some reason I went off script and told a little story. I got more feedback on that little story than on anything else I said that morning.

The little story goes like this.

A minister was preaching on the topic of joy in his sermon. At one point he pointed to the congregation and said, "I formally fire you all from your ministry positions. You are all freed of any obligations to the parish. And when the positions open again, I only want people to sign up for positions who feel like running up to sign up. People who passionate about contributing and who feel joy when serving in their chosen way."

We express our trust, or our lack of "offence" when we live, move and engage our being with joy. When we allow what motivates us to magnify the Lord. Joy is a true response to God's love and Jesus' invitation.

So when you come to the table this morning, I encourage you to find the joy in your heart. And offer it up to God in thanksgiving.

And then as a community, we wait with joyful expectation for the coming of our Lord. Amen.