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## *Surprised by Joy*

**A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh**  
**Advent 4 – Year C**

*Elizabeth said, “For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”*

Elizabeth’s child leaps for joy, and shortly thereafter, Mary “rejoices in God her Savior.”

This gospel is an important part of the Christmas Story. This gospel is important to understanding the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. And, this gospel contains the Song of Mary, one of the most beautiful pieces in the Anglican musical tradition. But, today, I want to preach about what it means to leap for joy.

So let me ask: What does it mean to leap for joy? When was the last time you leapt for joy?

I started thinking about moments in my life where I leapt for joy...but the leaping never seemed to last.

Let me share some of those moments:

For all you youth—I remember leaping for joy when I graduated from high school...but I stopped leaping during my first set of college exams.

For all you college students—I remember leaping for joy when I graduated from college...but I stopped leaping when I started working nights and weekends.

Finally, I remember leaping for joy when I was ordained a priest...but I stopped leaping during my first vestry meeting.

We tend to leap for joy during major life transitions...but then the new reality sets in and the leaping is gone.

Yes, Mary and Elizabeth are in the midst of major life transitions...but something else is causing them to leap. They are experiencing a different type of joy.

The word “joy” was leaping off the page when I started preparing for this sermon, so you can imagine how horrified I was when I did not see the word “joy” when I looked at the Greek text.

I was looking for the Greek word “chara,” the word we heard a lot last week: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). It wasn’t there.

Thankfully, Thee Smith (our resident Greek scholar), was in the office, and helped me identify a different word for joy, a word that is used by Elizabeth and Mary in today’s gospel.

The word is “agalliao” and is not used in any of the secular writings of the biblical era.

Why? Because this type of joy only comes from the Holy Spirit. Simply put, Elizabeth and Mary are surprised by joy.

The phrase *Surprised by Joy* should sound familiar, because it is the title of a book written by C.S. Lewis. Those of you who

know about the life of C.S. Lewis, know that shortly after he published *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis met and married an American woman named Joy Gresham.

Lewis believes joy is never in our power...joy comes from outside ourselves...joy comes from the Holy Spirit.

And in the case of Lewis' life, joy happened to come as a person. Joy came through the form of a holy relationship.

So, when was the last time the Holy Spirit filled you with joy? Can you think of a time where you leapt for joy? Or, are you wondering if you are a part of the frozen chosen?

Let me offer an example of what it might look like to open yourself up to joy.

Many of you know, I grew up in rural Tennessee, and during a high school youth event we decided it would be a good idea to dare each other to touch an electric fence. Thankfully, no one person was dumb enough to accept the dare, but collectively, a group of teenagers can be quite stupid.

We decided it would be cool if we held hands and had the person at the end of the line touch the electric fence. Sure enough, we all held hands and the idiot at the end of the line actually touched the fence.

Boom! The electricity went through our bodies and we were all leaping out of control.

It was certainly not my brightest decision, but it does offer an illustration of what it looks like to open yourself to the Holy Spirit.

You see, joy comes from outside. Joy comes from the Holy Spirit. And joy almost always comes when people are together, when we are holding hands with our friends, or when we are visiting those we love, like Mary and Elizabeth.

Joy comes when we are in relationship with other people. Some might even say joy comes when we are experiencing *koinonia*.

Remember, the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit comes when people are together...when there is holy community...holy relationship.

And, joy isn't confined to just happy occasions and pregnant women. Even the sad disciples, locked in a dark room grieving Jesus' death (John 20:19) are in a place to receive joy.

In that dark room, in holy relationship with others, Jesus appears and breathes the Holy Spirit into their lives. In their grief, they are surprised by joy.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent we find ourselves in many different places. Some of us are consumed by the stresses and anxieties of the season...

Others are anxious about the economic, political, religious, and social challenges this country is facing. There is not a lot of joy sitting in the recliner and watching the news.

Finally, some of us are facing a first Christmas without someone we love. Or, someone you dearly love is seriously ill and you are beside yourself. You are anxious because you know this week has the potential to be a living hell.

Remember, joy isn't something you have to create. Joy is something that comes outside of yourself. Joy is something that occurs in holy relationship.

Wherever you are, whatever is going on in your life, do not close yourself off to the possibility of being surprised by joy.

Remember Jesus' words, "When two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). Those words are about community and relationships.

During this holy week, be in relationship with others, open yourself to the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, and be prepared to be surprised by joy. AMEN.

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