

Children’s Moment

Good morning, girls and boys. I’m so glad you made time to be with us today. Esperanza and I pray for you and your family.

Are you ready for Christmas? If you’re like me the answer is “Yes!” I can’t wait for Christmas to get here. The last week before Christmas and the days after Christmas and before New Year’s day are always fun.

What’s your favorite part of Christmas? I like seeing family, all the good food we have, times to rest and ... getting presents! But there’s one problem. Sometimes we don’t get what we hope for. Or maybe our toy or gift breaks. I remember one year when we didn’t have any batteries and then they ran out really quickly.

That was disappointing. I felt badly and I got bored.

Did you know that there’s a Christmas gift that never needs batteries, never breaks and never wears out? It’s the kind of the gift that keeps on giving. We can share it with others and it only makes the gift even better.

The gift is Jesus. Jesus’ love doesn’t need batteries. It lasts for eternity. Jesus’ love never breaks. In fact, love heals and fixes relationships. Jesus’ love never wears out. Each year, when we come to Christmas, we’re reminded of God’s greatest love – you and me, and it never gets old. We’re reminded that heaven is a wonderful place, angels are very cool and people can stop fighting.

Best of all, when we share Jesus’ love with other people, they return love back to us. The gift gets better and better the more we share it. So, if you get a little tired or frustrated or disappointed this week, remember there’s a small, quiet gift waiting for us that won’t ever disappoint us, with calm us and will help us feel better. That gift is Jesus. Invite him to come to you and you’ll be glad.

Will you pray with me?

Devotion: “Elizabeth: Song of Blessing”

Every year, this season is filled with excitement! Yes, we’ve done it many times before. Our traditions are well known. Expectations are high and there’s a feeling in the air. There’s something about the season of Advent that brings out the kid in us. We all lean into the blessing and hope of Christmas. I say let the excitement grow. Let’s feel the buzz!

This week’s word is blessing but it should really be “Welcome.”

We’re getting closer to the coming of the Messiah, the embodiment of God’s blessing. We’re a few days away from the birth of Jesus and the song of life is the predominant theme. The counterpoint of sorrow, judgment, anxiety and fear is giving way to a melody of hope and love. It’s important to note that though this is a time of welcome and celebration, it can be a time of loneliness or sorrow for some people. This is why it’s so important that as we get ready to welcome the Savior, we also welcome our neighbors, especially those who are suffering during the holidays.

The narrative of the nativity places us at the home of Zachariah and Elizabeth. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is pregnant and she’s paying a visit to her cousin. In any culture, it’s always a happy time when relatives come to visit. We hear the bell ringing and little kids running and jumping, saying, “They’re here...” At the same time, Mom and Dad are also saying, “They’re here” with an undertone: “We haven’t finished all the cleaning. Dinner’s only half-way done Oh, there are more people than we expected.” In my own experience with my extended family, you can’t always be sure how many people are going to show up. It’s a fact of life! So, you move on and you get ready. “It’s party time!”

Elizabeth was happy. She’s excited to see Mary and her baby is equally excited to hear who’s at the door. Elizabeth says, “*For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy*” (Luke 1:44). What a powerful image! Elizabeth already knew that the baby carried by Mary is her Lord and Savior (v44). And, being further along in her pregnancy, the baby in her womb jumped for joy, as if knowing that his baby cousin Jesus is in his Mom’s womb.

Can we be that excited each time we gather for worship? Are you truly excited about Jesus? Can we communicate this joyful anticipation to other people? I hope so as that’s a Christmas gift that will always keep giving. No batteries are ever required and it won’t wear out.

The nativity story was foretold more than 400 years before it happened. Bethlehem and Mary receive the coming Lord. Are we like Elizabeth, ready to open the door and welcome God? The very God who has decided to set up tent in our neighborhood is more fascinated with each one of us than with a throne surrounded with angels and archangels (John 1:14; Philippians 2:6-8). God is ready to face all the risks and passions of all human beings – you and me included. That’s who an incarnate Christ is and what he means to us. God doesn’t leave us alone. God comes to join us where we are.

That’s a blessing if I ever heard one.

Here’s a question to reflect on: Who are you in the salvation story? Maybe you’re the messenger who carries good news. Maybe you’re Mary who is welcomed by her family. Maybe you’re the leaping child in Elizabeth’s womb, excited about the presence and coming of Christ.

Our lifesong is part of the Song of Christmas. Our lives are intertwined with Jesus’ life and the lives of Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, Zachariah and the lives of all who have followed Jesus, giving praise and honor to God. Don’t be shy! Let your song ring out across your neighborhood and across the world. God is pleased when you join the chorus of angels.

We can admit it’s okay to be full of joy and encourage each other. Uplifting messages are always good, but especially so as we approach Christmas day and the end of a difficult year. It’s wonderful when you realize you, too, can claim the promises of God and live out the Christmas story in your own life. The beauty and wonder that began in a manger in Bethlehem changes lives, families and all of creation, making us better when we are together. That’s God’s promise come to life.

There is another way to live and be. Jesus’ way transcends the trials and challenges of this world. God’s kingdom, which we catch a glimpse of at Christmas, is a place filled with light, love and peace. All are welcome at the manger.

I pray you find rest and peace this Christmas. I believe the way to find peace is to seek the manger. Go find Jesus. He’s waiting for you. You can let go. God is with you and will help you on the way. When we surrender to God, ready to receive the love and grace God offers, is when we find peace, spiritual rest and a joy that transcends what we find anywhere else on Earth. Best of all, you can encourage others to join you on your journey to the manger.

As you travel on the journey, you may find that you, or those you encourage, decide to become more involved in causes to promote justice and love. They may choose to support people going through transitions: mourning, surgery, relocation, sending kids away to college. They may stand alongside the poor and oppressed, incarcerated men and women, orphan kids, missionaries on furlough, and others. They may support our healthcare workers and all who are essentially helping us through life. This is how we become messengers of welcome, sharing God’s blessings in life.

I warmly welcome those who are visiting our church, those we meet in our paths, those who are thirsting for love, relationship, help and counsel. I’ve raised some open questions to invite you to find answers after this service is over. There are so many ways you can be a message of welcome, blessing others with the invitation to have God in their lives in a meaningful way. Let’s start with hospitality among our circle of friends and acquaintances, but especially beyond those you already know. Offer an invitation to widen the circle, knock at the doors of others, and open yourself to new ways to share God’s peace.

That’s God’s blessing and welcome. Let’s pass on it!

Luke 1:39-45 (CEB)

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

With a loud voice she blurted out,

“God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”