

# Menifee United Church of Christ

Established in 1962 by God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit

## SERMON FOR

December 20, 2015

*“Christ Is Coming! Leap For Joy!”*



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## ***Menifee United Church of Christ***

*Sunday Service and Sunday School 10 AM*

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***Following Jesus***

### **Luke 1:39-45**

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'*

### **Luke 1:46-56**

*And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.' And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.*

### ***“Christ is Coming! Leap For Joy!”***

A blank wall can be the canvas for a graffiti artist to create a beautiful mural. Or a blank wall can be where someone without much creativity, but with a can of spray paint, can scrawl some obscene screed for all the world to see. One day somebody saw a blank wall, but he didn't create a beautiful mural on it and he didn't scrawl an obscene screed on it. He wrote a religious message on it. It said, “Christ Is Coming!” Then later some wise guy came along and added the words, “Look Busy!” (I like that.)

Christ is coming. In five days Christ will be born...again...as he has been for 2,000 years. (Actually, the Church didn't start celebrating the birth of Jesus until about 1,700 years ago.) We celebrate the birth of Jesus, just like we celebrate the birth of every child. But not every child grows up to be Jesus. I imagine they celebrated the birth of Charles Manson, but then he grew up to be Charles Manson. I imagine they celebrated the birth of Jeffrey Dahmer, but then he grew up to be Jeffrey Dahmer. And I even imagine they celebrated the birth of Adolf Hitler, but then he grew up to be Adolf Hitler.

But Jesus grew up to be Jesus, thank God. Jesus grew up to tell us and show us how to live. (And not in a wimpy, holier-than-thou kind of way, but in an overturn the money changers tables kind of way.) Jesus grew up to tell us and show us how to love. (And not in a mushy, sentimental kind of way, but in a love a person of a completely different faith kind of way.) Jesus grew up to tell us and show us how to forgive. (And not in an I'll forgive you for cutting me off in traffic kind of way, but in an I'll forgive you for nailing me to this cross kind of way.) And Jesus grew up to tell us and show us how to help. (And not in a here's my spare change kind of way, but in a let's revolutionize society from the bottom up kind of way.)

What do you celebrate most about Jesus? Do you celebrate his birth? Do you celebrate his sacrificial death and resurrection? Do you celebrate his life? Or do you celebrate all of the above? Well, John the Baptist celebrated Jesus even before Jesus was born. And even before John the Baptist was born.

A pregnant Mary went to see her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. Mary said, "Hello, Elizabeth," or some such greeting. And when Elizabeth heard it, the child in her womb, who would become John the Baptist, "leaped for joy." Then Mary began to sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Mary sang that the Lord "has scattered the proud," "brought down the powerful," and, "sent the rich away empty." Mary also sang that the Lord, "has lifted up the lowly," and, "filled the hungry with good things."

Toni Morrison says, when your children walk into the room, "Does your face light up?" Or do you see if their pants are

buckled? Well, whenever my daughter calls from Washington DC, and I see her name on my caller ID, I believe my face lights up. I imagine when you get a call or a visit from a loved one, your face lights up, too. And I imagine that kind of thing happened with John the Baptist. John is sitting there in Elizabeth's womb, when he hears the voice of Mary, who's carrying Jesus in her womb. Luke tells us that John "leaped for joy." Now, let's not argue about how many weeks along Elizabeth would have had to be for John to actually do that. Let's just take the message of that story at face value. And the message is: Christ is coming! Leap for joy! Although the message also is that the Lord looks at the powerful and the lowly differently.

Christ is coming! And, according to Mary, the lowly should leap for joy! Christ is coming! So the little children should leap for joy! (Because Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.") Christ is coming! So the poor should leap for joy! (Because Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.") Christ is coming! So the least of these - the stranger, the sick, the prisoner - should leap for joy! (Because Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.")

Christ is coming! But, according to Mary, the powerful shouldn't leap for joy. Christ is coming! But the rich shouldn't leap for joy. (Because Jesus said, "woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.") Christ is coming! But the scribes and the Pharisees - the Biblical literalists of his day - shouldn't leap for joy. (Because Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!") Christ is coming! But warmongers shouldn't leap for joy. (Because Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.") So Jesus opposes the powerful and sides with the lowly. As do others.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest, theologian, and writer, who, after decades of teaching, went on to live and work with mentally and physically handicapped people, sided with the lowly. Henri Nouwen said, "For Jesus, there are no countries to be conquered,

no ideologies to be imposed, no people to be dominated. There are only children, women, and men to be loved.” Wow! That’s good!

When I think of the goodness of Henri Nouwen and others, I think: I am unapologetically Christian. But then I think of all the things that Christians have to apologize for. The Crusades. The Inquisition. The Salem Witch Trials. Televangelists. And I think: Okay, maybe I’m apologetically Christian. But then I think of all the good things Christians have done. Started hospitals. Run soup kitchens. Helped people in times of disaster and war. Fed people on Christmas Day.

On Christmas Day at 2 PM in our Fellowship Hall volunteers from this church will feed people in need, the elderly, and others. We’ll feed them ham, scalloped potatoes, vegetables, rolls, and Christmas cookies. We’ll get help from other churches, too. And that’s as it should be, at a time when we think of: Peace on earth, good will to all.

This is a United Church of Christ church, and I’m a United Church of Christ minister; which means this is a progressive Christian church, and I’m a progressive Christian minister. And everybody should know, if they don’t already - certainly the people who joined this church this morning know - that we commit acts of compassion, and we speak and work for justice for all. That might upset some people. Outside of this church. And inside of this church. When I say things like: We’ll house the homeless. When I say things like: We’ll marry same-sex couples. Or when I say things like: We’ll take in Syrian Refugees. All that might upset some people. But we can’t do anything other than what we do, because we truly believe - deep in our bones, deep in our hearts, and deep in our souls - that we are following Jesus. Some of us even hear from Jesus directly.

A parishioner tells me he prays to Jesus every night in bed as he goes to sleep. And that parishioner tells me, Jesus comes to him in his sleep. Is that parishioner seeing Jesus for real? Or is that parishioner just seeing Jesus in a dream? And if it is just a dream, is a dream not real?

I see little floaty things in my eyes. Maybe you do, too. My eye doctor tells me he can't zap 'em with a laser. They're just there. They're not in what I'm looking at. If I'm looking at a sunset, I see floaty things. But there aren't any floaty things out there by the sun. They're in my eyes only. No one else can see them. I think of religious experiences the same way. I might have an encounter with Jesus, but no one else can see him or hear him or feel him. Only I can. And yet, I believe it's a real encounter with Jesus. You might have an encounter with Jesus, too, but no one else can see him or hear him or feel him. Only you can. And I'll bet you believe it's a real encounter with Jesus. As real as the floaty things in my eyes and as real as the floaty things in your eyes. As real as the Jesus that parishioner sees in his sleep. Have you ever seen Jesus, awake or asleep?

Mother Teresa, who's now close to being designated a saint, said she saw Jesus in the face of everyone. I do, too. Or at least I try to. I try to see the face of Jesus or the image of God in everyone I meet. And sometimes I do. And when that happens, I'm shocked. I think: Oh my goodness! I'm looking at the face of Jesus! Or: Oh my goodness! I'm looking at the image of God!

It's not always easy to see the face of Jesus or the image of God in another person. Especially when you're looking at the face of your enemy. Because when you're looking at the face of your enemy, rather than see the face of Jesus or the image of God, you're more likely to think you see the face of the Devil or the image of Satan. We're certainly not supposed to think that the face of a gay person, the face of an immigrant, or the face of a Muslim, is the face of our enemy. Which is why Jesus told us not to have any enemies and to love any enemies that we might have. We are reminded of that during this time of year, when, instead of thinking of enemies, we're supposed to think of a babe in a manger, we're supposed to wish people a "Merry Christmas," and we're supposed to sing Christmas carols, filled with joy.

"Joy To The World," is a Christmas carol, a sacred song, that might make us, or at least our spirit, leap for joy. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." For those who prefer a more secular version of "Joy To The World," there's always the one by Three Dog Night. "Joy to the world: All the boys and girls, now. Joy

to the fishes in the deep blue sea: Joy to you and me.” If you hear either version of “Joy To The World,” and you remember: Christ is coming, then either song might make you, or at least your spirit, leap for joy.

When I was in seminary we were told that we are Christ’s representatives on earth. Maybe you've heard that, too. That you are Christ’s representative on earth. If you haven't heard that, let me say it again: You are Christ’s representative on earth. In other words, when you look in the mirror, you are looking at Jesus. And when you look at others, just like Mother Teresa did, you are looking at Jesus.

Christ is coming! Leap for joy!

Christ is here! Leap for joy!

Christ is in others! Leap for joy!

And Christ is in you! Leap for joy!

Let us pray...

*God of Love,  
Help us to see Christ in ourselves.  
Help us to see Christ in others.  
And help us to be Christ to others.  
Now and forevermore.  
By the power of the Holy Spirit.  
And in the name of Jesus.  
Amen.*

## THE GOLDEN RULE

*Do to others what you would  
have them do to you.*  
Christianity

*What is hateful to you  
do not do to others.*  
Judaism

*None of you believes until he wishes for his  
brother what he wishes for himself.*  
Islam

*Do not do to others  
what would cause pain if done to you.*  
Hinduism

*Hurt not others in ways that you yourself  
would find hurtful.*  
Buddism

*Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain,  
and your neighbor's loss as your loss.*  
Taoism

*Do not do to others  
what you do not want them to do to you.*  
Confucianism

*Treat other people  
as you'd want to be treated in their situation.*  
Humanism