

Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 1: 39-50; Luke 1: 47-55

We all want to be happy and enjoy the Christmas season. We might not be feeling it right now, but we all want to get there. Right?! We associate happiness with the joy of gift giving and family gatherings at Christmas. We all know the joy, the rejoicing in the announcement that a family member or friend is expecting. Most of us know it first hand as we begin or expand our own family. We all know the irresistible joy in honouring the gift of a fresh new soul, the joy of celebrating a new generation. We know that inner lift and lightness we feel deep in our being.

As we drop in on our Christmas story, we are touched by the tenderness of this same joy so long ago. No other season or observance focuses on tenderness the way Advent and especially Christmas Eve do. No other season calls forth our compassion like Christmas.

Compassion in the scriptures comes from the ancient world's concept '**to feel with the womb**'. It is the deep connectedness of sharing the same womb or of springing from a particular womb: The deep connectedness to the fruit of one's womb. And this is what is going on in our gospel lessons today.

Mary and **Elizabeth** are feeling with their wombs, physically and metaphorically, and the experience is spilling out, through *recognition, prophesy and song*. **Rejoicing** erupts as **Elizabeth** and **Mary** meet and feel their wombs working overtime, and share the **tenderness** of bearing **God**'s dream into the world. **Compassion tied to tenderness** brings us all the way to the cradle of the **Christ Child**.

There is a mood that draws us in: An aura of tenderness that touches our hearts: A tenderness we express today toward a newly expecting couple or a newborn babe. It is **Compassion tied to Tenderness**; that **hoping** and **recognizing** and **pledging** and **giving of the best**, which wells up in us as the **Joy** of Christmas.

However, **compassion tied to tenderness** so often; and so easily gets turned into sentimentality these days. Warm fuzzy feelings massacred as joy. Sentimental images and nostalgic songs impersonate compassion. Cartoon caricatures pretend tenderness. Hallmark Christmas specials warm the heart at the expense of facing reality. Sentimentality actually desensitizes us. It locks us in our comfort zone, never challenging us to get out of it and make a difference.

We know that some Christmases we just go missing caught up in the comfort zone of some sentimental journey. Some years we get grinchy, upset by the focus on getting as opposed to giving at Christmas and fall backward into the trap of commercialism.

We know the blue note of loss, or loneliness, sounds in many souls during this season. We have lived long enough to experience some sort of loss or loneliness at this time. A sense of abandonment can also flatten or fray our response to the season. Dashed hopes, broken peace, strangled joys and shattered love litter our inner lives causing us to hide away.

And yet in the midst of our trials we don't give in to despair. We grasp for new possibilities, new birth. We dig deep into the rich symbols of our faith for the life renewing ingredients of Advent and Christmas. We search for insight where the life of **Jesus** shines a light in our darkness. With Mary and Elizabeth, we discover **compassion tied to tenderness** brings forth an unexpected **joy** from within us.

You see, only **compassion tied to tenderness** responses adequately to real pain and suffering. Only **hoping** and **recognizing** and **pledging** and **giving the best** are the appropriate responses to rejection or loss. Mary and Elizabeth knew rejection, loss, shame, disgrace: One too old and one too young, each in the family way, scandalous to say the least. Remember Elizabeth is in 'seclusion' and Mary is heading into hiding with her. Yet, they respond to each other with **compassion tied to tenderness**.

Together they **hope** and **recognize** what is happening.
Together, they **pledge** and **give, sing** and **celebrate**.

Compassion tied to tenderness becomes our **Christmas** inspired response to the real world where death does not take a holiday during our holidays: Where basic human needs go unmet amidst festive feasting: Where loved ones are deeply missed amidst the celebration of the season.

Yes, Christmas and Christianity depend on the deep connection of **compassion**; yet its **joy** only comes when tied to **tenderness**: The **tenderness** that **hopes** and **recognizes** and **pledges** and **gives** the best. This makes all the difference at Christmas.

Application for Advent

So, **recognize** the tenderness. **Feel** the tenderness.

Share the tenderness. And **rejoice**.

For **Compassion tied to Tenderness** becomes the **Joy** of **Advent** and **Christmas**.

Meditative Prayer

Let's get grounded in God.

Follow your breathing inward.

Come into that prayful place.

Rest there as you open up to the Mystery in the midst of life.

Open up to your hopes for family and friends.

Open up to your hopes for the thousands of Syrian Refugees arriving
in our province over the next few weeks.

Open up to your hope for this faith community and the other faith communities
who are planning or preparing to respond with compassion tied
to tenderness.

Open up to recognize that we have a part to play in new births and new beginning
for the new strangers in our midst.

Open up to recognize that our Christian hospitality needs to be seen and shared
in this telling moment in our history.

Open up to pledge to do your part.

Open up to pledge to help us as a church, do our part, in bringing the joy of Advent
and Christmas to others in need.

Open up to give the basics that new families need to settle in our land, in this
winter season and beyond.

Open up to give compassion tied to tenderness to those we meet this Advent
Christmas.

And now, let us come together as one heart where compassion is tied to tenderness,
praying as Jesus taught us saying;

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.