

It is always exciting when relatives and out-of-town guests arrive for Christmas celebrations. The doorbell rings and the kids run and jump, “They’re here!” While the adults say, “They’re here... (in a slanted tone.) Ready or not, Christmas is coming. The guests are arriving, if not already here. How will we receive them?

Will we reluctantly get up off our hands and knees from combing the fringe on the area rugs? Will we exclaim, “We haven’t finished cleaning! Dinner is not ready! How many people are coming?” Will we say, “No, no, no, it’s not time! We’re not ready!” Or, will we say, “It is what it is. What is done is done. Christmas is here. Come in. Welcome.”

In the scripture passage, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, and when she arrives, Elizabeth is excited to see her. Even the baby in her womb, John the Baptist, is excited to hear who’s at the door. Elizabeth says to Mary, “As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy” (v.44). What a way to welcome an out-of-town relative! Not only does Elizabeth convey her excitement, but also her unborn baby’s. Elizabeth’s work was probably not finished, and she may not have felt that well, being further along in her pregnancy, but she genuinely welcomed her guests with joy.

Elizabeth knew that she was also welcoming her Lord. She was excited: “Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, she was “filled with the Holy Spirit,” (v.41) as we are when Christ comes to us. In this instance, the Holy Spirit revealed to her the reason for Mary’s visit, and Elizabeth welcomed her with joy and excitement for what was to come.

Mary’s response is one of welcoming as well. She could’ve said

something along these lines, “Girl, you are not going to believe what just happened to me! This angel came to me and told me that I was going to have a baby named Jesus, the Son of God, whose kingdom will never end. I asked him, ‘How could this be?’ I don’t even know what I’m going to do. Joseph is going to flip out.” But, she didn’t.

Mary responds with a song of praise. She welcomes God’s will for her life by singing, and she sings a song about how good God is to her and all people. God lifts up the lowly and feeds the hungry. God has brought down the powerful and kept his promises. God has shown his strength and his mercy and will continue to do so for generation to generation. Even though Mary has some technical questions about how all this was going to go down, Mary welcomes the LORD with a joyful heart.

Because both Elizabeth and Mary welcome the LORD, God gives them two things they each lacked: community and connection. God removes their isolation and helps them to understand themselves more fully as part of something larger than themselves. Together, they bear the messenger and the message. Together, they are known more fully, and begin to see more clearly. Together, when they welcome the LORD, they receive peace.

It is two days before Christ’s coming. We are to open the door and welcome the God who comes to us. Love is coming down in the form of a little baby, and we are to open our hearts and lives to receive this love. Christ will come to us again and again through Word and Spirit, and we are to welcome him with open arms, just like the little baby in many nativity scenes. We are to continue welcoming Christ’s love to receive what we need, to receive what we lack, and to receive peace.

When we say “No” to God’s call on our lives, we are not welcoming. When we

say, “Not yet, Lord, there’s something else I want to do first,” we are not welcoming. When we say, “This area of my life is ‘off limits’ to you, God,” we are not welcoming. When we put up walls, label people with hurtful names that indicate they are different, or put people in categories of whom is deserving and whom is not, we are not welcoming. When we judge people, we are not welcoming. When we withhold love and acceptance, we are not welcoming. And, when we are not welcoming, we are not giving or receiving Christ’s love and peace.

If we do not open our hearts and welcome this tiny baby wrapped in love, hope, joy and peace, Christmas will come and go as if it’s just another day. Another year will pass, and we’re still in the miserable place we’ve always been. We don’t have to live that way. There is hope, love, joy, and peace wrapped in this gift of Christ. Open it, unwrap it, layer by layer, and welcome Christ into your life again and again. When we open ourselves to this gift, we welcome Christ.

Where do you need to welcome Jesus in your life? Is there a place that has been off limits that it’s time to surrender? Is there an area of weakness or brokenness that you need Christ’s love to come and heal? In this moment of quiet, silently whisper that area to God.

God of Peace, we struggle. We try to figure out things on our own. We try to live by the rules of this world, yet once again, we end up broken, exhausted, and discouraged. We tried to prepare the way for you, but we fell short. This area that we whispered to you, we lay it down. We open our hearts and lives to the hope, love, joy, and peace you bring. We leap for joy that you love us so much that you come to us, over and over again. Help us to be truly excited to welcome you into our lives, this

coming Christmas, and every day thereafter. Thank you for this gift of Christ, the gift of connection, the gift of community, and the gift of peace. Amen.

As the Praise Band comes forward to play the closing song, please stand and pass the peace of Christ to each other. You greet someone and say, “Peace be with you” or “The Peace of Christ be with you.” And, then you respond with, “And also with you.” May we continue to pass the peace of Christ to each other and throughout the world.