

Bearing Witness to Joy

Luke 1:39-56

Third Sunday in Advent/ 13th December 2020

The word often associated with the Third Sunday in Advent is *joy*. The third Advent candle is the joy candle. It's sometimes pink as it's associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is the Sunday we put the spotlight on Mary's visit with Elizabeth and listen again to Mary's song of gladness, joy, and hope, her canticle known today as the Magnificat. *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*. The Latin translation of the first line of Mary's song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior" (Lk. 1:46b-47).

This year, when so many are hurting and afraid the mention of joy seems out of place. It's almost obscene to talk about being joyful when we're surrounded by so much pain and loss. There is good news with the FDA's emergency release of the Pfizer vaccine on Friday. But it will be months before most Americans receive it. In the meantime, the COVID numbers are spiking just about everywhere, daily deaths are in the thousands. This week the United States exceeded the number of lives lost in the Second World War. Hospitals are at capacity. Heroic healthcare workers are at their limits, stressed and scared. As we move toward Christmas, there are people who are out of work, some are close to losing their homes, people are lining up for hours to receive food to feed their families. People are grieving, sad. No—no one I know is full of joy this year. We're all just trying to hold it together and some are just hanging on by a slim thread. No, I don't know anyone full of joy. I don't know how anyone can be—unless they're just not paying attention or in denial, completely detached from reality. My favorite carol is "Joy to the World," and we will sing it on Christmas Eve, but will our hearts—will my heart—really be in it? So many of our songs of a merry Christmas probably sound a little hollow this year. I'm finding that the dark, minor-keyed hymns of Advent have a deeper resonance for me this season and better reflect our hopes and dreams. Things are bleak and it's not even mid-winter.

And so we have this text, this story. What might it have to say to where we find ourselves today?

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, the angel Gabriel informed Mary that she would have a child, whose name will be Jesus—*Yeshua*, meaning "Yahweh saves." He will come in the name of the God who saves. Mary learned to her surprise that her relative Elizabeth, who was elderly and could not bear a child, was actually pregnant (Luke 1:26-38). When Gabriel shared the news with Elizabeth, he promised, "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth..." (Lk. 1:14). She would have a son and he will be called John. Mary consents and says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38). After Gabriel's departure Mary sets out in haste to visit Elizabeth. Mary enters the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth—and remember, at this point in the story, Zechariah is silent, he has been muted by Gabriel because he doubted the message of good news (Lk. 1:19-20). Zechariah was "cancelled," leaving Elizabeth with voice and agency and insight because she, like Mary, was open to the angel's message.

When Mary enters their home she greets Elizabeth and Elizabeth, we're told, felt her child leap within her. The Holy Spirit overwhelmed her and filled her with insight and said, without Mary telling her a thing, "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" (Lk. 1:42b-44).

Joy and gladness fill Elizabeth. Then joy and gladness fill Mary as she breaks forth into song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior" (Lk. 1:46b-47). Joy and gladness. Joy runs all through Luke's Gospel. Joy seems to move the narrative along. And don't we, with the shepherds abiding in the fields, hear the angel shout, "Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Lk. 2:10-11)? Joy for the poor. Joy for the marginalized. Joy for the overlooked and lowly. Joy for the hungry. Joy for the world.

Yes, joy runs right through the birth stories of John and Jesus. Joy is like a steady subterranean current that runs deep below the surface of things. And I think it's good for us to know and remember this, especially when life on the surface is anything but joyful.

Sure, Elizabeth and Mary are joyful, glad at the prospect of giving birth, of bringing life into the world—but they are also bringing life into a tough world, a scary world, a world where women had no rights, were not valued for themselves, without a voice. Which makes Luke's Gospel all the more remarkable because these are strong women with voices, with agency, determined to support each other, to share their stories and lives, their hopes and fears. Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months (Lk. 1:46). Sharing hopes and fears in a world ruled by an alien, oppressive force, an empire with alien gods, in a world where the arrogant and prideful, the rich and powerful get away with murder and stand in the way of God's justice and crush the bodies and spirits of God's people. Hopes and fears in lives that are fragile and precarious, vulnerable to disease and infection. Lives full of blood, sweat, and tears—lives of enormous difficulty, people suffering terribly, desperately in need of mercy, compassion, grace, healing, waiting for the tables of injustice to be overturned, conditions reversed, and a new, different future given to the sons and daughters of Abraham for generations and generations. And their hopes and fears were not unlike our own.

And, so, can you feel the tension here? Elizabeth and Mary are living in a dangerous, scary world, and yet, at the same time, they are joyful. This joy does not originate in them but is directly related to what God is doing in and through them, in and through the world. This joy is directly related to the movement of the Holy Spirit who overwhelms and fills them with a joy that comes from some place deeper, that wells up and erupts within them to exclaim praise, doxology, thanksgiving and hope. They didn't do anything to produce the joy or earn the joy. They were probably surprised by joy, as we are often surprised by joy. It comes in the moment. We don't expect it.

On Thursday morning in Bible study last week we explored Mary's visitation to Elizabeth. On Thursday evening, in our adult education series for Advent, we also talked about this text and the nature of joy and how it's different than happiness. We were also reminded of another place in scripture where joy is mentioned. Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, "Rejoice

in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4-7). The entire letter is suffused and infused with joy. “I thank my God,” Paul writes, “every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you” (Phil. 1:3). “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.” Can you command someone to rejoice? Perhaps. But what we need to remember is that Paul wrote these words to the church that he loved while he was in prison. His fate, his future was unknown. He’s in considerable danger and yet he talks about joy, wants to talk about joy, can’t help talking about joy. I think we discover something remarkable about the nature of joy here, that joy resides at a very deep place within us. It’s the part of us that remembers and knows—despite all that is happening in our lives or the world, “out there,”—we are nevertheless held fast by God’s covenantal, faithful love from generation to generation. And this means that we can both be in prison or any place or situation that is confining, scary, dangerous, life-threatening *and* still find ourselves drawing from the deeper well of joy, still knowing there are reasons for joy. You can be afraid *and* joyful. Both situations can be true at exactly the same time. Both *are* true. We can be brutally realistic about the sorry state of the world *and* still claim there is occasion for joy.

Because the deeper truth is that joy is underneath it all, all the time. And the Holy Spirit helps us to draw from it or to rest in it and trust it—like Elizabeth and Mary. Sometimes we just need to collapse exhausted into it, fall into it. The Holy Spirit helps us see that we can be rooted and grounded in it. We can sink down deep into it, like tap roots that search for the source of life. “The world is deep,” Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote, “The world is deep/ And deeper than the day could read./ Deep is its woe—Joy—deeper still than grief...Joy would have eternity,/ —Profound, profound eternity!”¹ The German philosopher Nietzsche was a tormented soul and I wonder if he ever really believed his own writings. “Joy...deeper still than grief. “

The Trappist monk and mystic Thomas Merton (1915-1968) said something similar. Merton connects the experience of “joy” with a sense of “wholeness,” and points to something deep that holds us, supports. Last Thursday, December 10, marked the 52nd anniversary of his death. “No matter how broken our world may be,” Merton wrote, “there is a hidden wholeness just beneath the surface of all visible thing. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a foundation of action and joy. It rises up in gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being.”² Hidden wholeness. The source of joy. A joy that erupts and then pours forth in praise and song and hope—as both Elizabeth and Mary knew.

And like Elizabeth and Mary we can bear witness to this truth, bear witness to this joy. I came across this week a beautiful painting of Mary’s visitation to Elizabeth, by the Italian Renaissance painter Jacopo da Pontormo (1494-1557).³ Unlike so many other depictions of the visitation, we don’t find Elizabeth falling on her knees before Mary. Here, they stand facing each other: a young woman confidently staring into the eyes of a mature woman, both mothers-to-be. But that gaze—look at their, their look, face-to-face, eye-to-eye. It’s as if Mary is saying, “We’re going to do this together.” Together bearing witness to the joy that fills them even as they are about to step into a destiny that no-doubt scares them both. But they stand, arms touching, together. And standing behind them in the painting are two unknown women behind, not looking at them, but looking through them, beyond them, looking at us—they are bearing witness to Elizabeth and Mary and watching us as we look at Elizabeth and Mary—and we are pulled into this together.



Isn't this our work as disciples, to bear witness to the joy, especially in trying times, confusing times, scary and terrifying times? We're all in this together, bearing witness to God's determination to save us and love us in this broken, fearful world because, nevertheless, there is still reason for joy.



¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, published between 1883 and 1885.

² From Thomas Merton's poem "Hagia Sophia," completed during Pentecost 1963, included in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 363-371. I'm grateful to Bill Sitterley, friend and fellow Presbyterian minister, for introducing me to this poem.

³ Known as the Carmignano Visitation (c.1528-1530), now in the Church of Saint Michael and Francis, Carmignano, Italy.

