

Embodied
Preacher: Rev. Reebee Girash
Date: December 15, 2019

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
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Texts:
Isaiah 35:1-10 and Luke 1:46-55 from the Inclusive Bible translation (see copy)
Sermon

Joy to the world
Joy to the world
Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room!

Mary could sing this song. She knows from rejoicing. In her heart and in her body she is preparing room for not just a son but a Savior.

But how can Mary rejoice? The angel tells Mary not to be afraid, tells Mary she is blessed among people. Gabriel tells her something wonderful is going to happen to her, in her, because of her. But she is a young unmarried woman living in a moment when the consequences of unplanned pregnancy were incredibly serious. None of this should have happened to her. On the surface this is not good news.

Luke tells us she is perplexed and wouldn't this be the understatement of two millennia?

We have all gotten tough news in our lives. From the unplanned pregnancy, to the diagnosis, to the headline you cannot bear, to the call from the police. Terror washes over you, and sadness, and fear. Life changes irrevocably in a moment. Margaret Feinberg describes the moment of her serious diagnosis: "My head dropped into liquid amber. Time halted. The conversation blurred." Life gets hard sometimes.

No, no, Pastor Reebee, that's not the topic for today. You're thinking about the wrong passage of scripture, today's passages are all about joy, you say. It's JOY Sunday, you told us to wear pink!

And so it is. And so I did.

Because
Mary, a young unmarried pregnant woman,
Shocked by the angel's diagnosis,
Does what we might do -
She prays.
She ponders.

She takes a long walk.
To the house of someone close to her, her cousin Elizabeth, for counsel and support.
Elizabeth does not shame her but helps her see the beauty, the potency, the possibility in what is happening.
Elizabeth points to Mary's strength.

And most of all, Elizabeth points to God's presence.

I think this is a pivotal moment, in which Mary feels God's presence and love in her life,
She steps back from the danger and the fear.
She realizes that in the midst of,
in spite of,
In response to
She can find joy.

Mary finds the meaning in her own challenge, the hope within her own body.

Mary discovers strength within herself.

Mary feels within herself God's own heart growing.

Mary's heart begins to prepare God room.

"Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.'" (Isaiah 35)

'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' (Luke 1, NRSV)

My spirit rejoices in God my savior, she sings!

Mary is ready to Take Joy.

Margaret Feinberg, whose comment about her cancer diagnosis I quoted earlier, says in the same book called *Fight Back with Joy*, that joy is an action, more than a feeling. "The Bible insists that joy is more than a feeling; it's an action. We don't just sense joy; we embody it by how we respond to the circumstances before us. What is the genesis of this joy? I believe that, at its core, joy emanates from the abiding sense of God's fierce love for us."

So Mary is singing her version of Joy to the World, her hymn to justice and liberation, her word of hope for the powerless, her word of freedom for the oppressed, her word of abundance for the hungry, because even in the midst of her own challenge she can feel God at work in her life and the world.

She is like Miriam and Hannah before her.

Miriam, who saved her baby brother Moses, and walked with her people out of Egypt - Miriam sang a song of praise to God for freeing the enslaved and liberating the oppressed.

Hannah, who waited so long to have a child, was so joyful at the birth of Samuel that she sang a song of praise to God.

Mary, an unwed teenage mother, sang a song of strength, justice and joy.

And the world may not have been perfect yet.
It may not have been what God wanted it to be yet.
Their lives were not easy.
They sang with joy

Even though.
Because God was with them.
And they sang the vision of the world they knew God wanted
And they were part of bringing into being.

And they sang with joy because, as M. Barclay puts it, "Joy is an essential component of our work for liberation, of building the kind of world we long for....we practice living what we desire to see manifested in the world. And hopefully, that's a world with joy."

Mary's son Jesus would teach his followers to live with joy:

"9 As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." John 15

Mary and Jesus are both teachers of joy. Isn't that amazing? A humble young woman facing deep challenge, and a great teacher facing death are both teachers of joy.

Or think of it this way. Our greatest Teacher, and his own teacher, and most of those who came before and after them, are teachers of joy.

Isaiah teaches joy, too:
The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing. (Isaiah 35)

It's part of Isaiah's vision of a just and beautiful future.

Isaac Watts teaches Joy to the World,

Not just Joy to me,

Joy to the World.

And among our great contemporary teachers, Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama also teach joy. You know they have each been through their share of challenge, hardship, tragedy. This is what they say about joy, even though, joy, in spite of, joy, in response to.

"There is no joy without sorrow...Indeed, the more we turn toward the suffering, our own and others, the more we can turn toward the joy....true joy is a way of being, not a fleeting emotion....we cannot pursue joy as an end in itself or we will miss the bus. Joy comes from daily thoughts, feelings, and actions...the action that gets us on the bus is bringing joy to others."

Isaiah envisioned joy from exile.

Mary felt God's presence in her difficult but sacred calling and rejoiced in God's presence and God's coming reign of justice.

She embodied joy.

Jesus taught that when we abide in God's love, our joy will be complete.

Isaac Watts envisioned a world filled with joy.

Two holy people of our day can find joy through treating others with compassion.

Friends, I think the message this Sunday is indeed one of joy.
And whatever weighs upon you this Advent season, I pray you will
Take joy, rejoice always, know God is with you, abide in God's love
And sing Joy to the World
Like you mean it.

Amen.

Call to Offering

When one of our community has cause to rejoice, we all have cause to rejoice. The delight of our neighbor is also our delight. The well being of the earth is our own wellness. Our joy is entangled - yours and mine and ours and all of us. And so let us bring what we have together, seeing, with God's help, joy to the world. (from enfleshed)