

Longing for Joy

Luke 1:46-55

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Welcome to the third week of Advent! Over these past weeks we've talked about Advent hope, Advent peace, and today let's settle in to the joy of it all. You know, I have my mom, Joyce, to thank for my love for this season. She was always all about creating a sense of anticipation and wonder in the four weeks of Advent. I learned early on to pay attention to the deep sense of longing for joy, so that when Christmas finally arrived, I was really ready for it. There were a lot of ways that we made that happen, but tending to the nativity set under our tree was one of my very favorites. Every day we'd add another piece to the growing collection of characters – angels and shepherds, sheep and donkeys, kings on camels from the east and stars in the night sky. Every day another character was placed just so, until finally it came time to put the Baby Jesus in the manger, because well you know, there was no room in the inn. Year after year, I'd anticipate Advent, the daily experience of preparing to welcome joy.

Well, this year's been a little different for me, and maybe for you, as well. There's never really been an Advent season like this one, ever, has there? Finding joy in this season of Advent, to say nothing of this entire year, has been a bit of a challenge, to say the least. If we're honest, more than a few of us have probably wondered how we'll find hope in the midst of the isolation of a pandemic. Maybe we've wondered how to truly experience peace or joy when it feels a lot like we're losing more than we're gaining on just about every level. Maybe you've questioned if it's even possible to know the depth and power of love when we can't be with those we love.

Well, friends, welcome to the third week in the season of Advent, where once again we're reminded that in the midst of all that we may not know, there is one thing that we do know. That the birth of the Baby Jesus, the Savior, changed everything 2000 years ago. And that birth is still changing everything right now. Today I want to take you on a little journey through

our longing for joy. I want you to hear a remarkable passage from Luke's Gospel. But I want you to hear it a little differently than you're probably used to hearing it. I also want to talk about the difference between joy and happiness, and give you a little insight into Mary's life, so that we can better appreciate how her experience can help us find joy in our lives, even when we're challenged. And finally, I want to lead you through a really brief but powerful exercise in singing Mary's song of gratitude.

The passage from Luke 1 is called the Magnificat. It's Mary's joyful response to the announcement from the angel that God would partner with her to gift the world with the Messiah. It's Mary's response of joy to the Good News that through her the world would come to know the Lord of lords, the King of kings, the Savior, the Messiah, Jesus. So here's Mary's song from Luke 1:46-55 (NLT).

⁴⁶ Mary responded, "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

⁴⁷ How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! ⁴⁸ For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. ⁴⁹ For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me. ⁵⁰

He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. ⁵¹ His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

⁵² He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. ⁵⁵ For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever."

And that is the word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Well, let's explore that a little bit. The images of Mary that many of us might have may picture her wearing pastel shades of blue and white. She might be riding on the back of a donkey. She might even be praying with her eyes looking downward to reveal a halo behind her head. Popular images of Mary show a beautiful, innocent, feminine and, if we're honest, probably a fair-skinned girl. Those are just some of the ways we see this young woman, that is before we start peeling away a couple thousand years of Western culture.

But to fully appreciate the power of Mary's prayer, we need to take into consideration the really dire

situation that Mary was in when she sang this song. The news that the angel delivered wasn't initially met with resounding applause. When the angel announced that she would become pregnant and give birth to the Savior of the world Mary was a bit, shall we say, baffled and disconcerted. Her soul was deeply troubled. She was more than a little confused about what she was hearing. I mean, from a purely technical perspective, because she was somewhere around 13, a virgin, and about to become pregnant without a husband, Mary was afraid for her life. In the first century, being connected to a husband was mostly about security. In the first century, to grow into midlife or beyond without the social connection of a male was dangerous. And being pregnant, for Mary, was like receiving a death sentence. At the very least, there would be strong possibilities of her engagement being called off and her being ostracized for the shame of all of that, leaving her feeling utterly abandoned by everyone.

Let me just pause for a moment and let that sink in. Then let me ask you this: Have there been moments over the past several months that you'd describe as dire? Has your heart ached about anything going on in your life? Has your soul been troubled at all? Have there been some days over these past several months that have left you confused by what you've seen or heard or what you've read in the media? Have you felt isolated, alone, worried for others or perhaps worried for yourself that catching the coronavirus might be a death sentence?

Friends, Mary's story and our stories really aren't too far apart. For people who long for joy, this is a story that inspires trust that God will lead us forward into joy even as we continue to make our way through challenging times. Mary's prayer, the song, the Magnificat is a kind of manifesto of joy for every person who has longed for joy that transcends whatever it is we're experiencing in the moment. What a challenge it must have been for this faithful young woman. Let's listen to her response.

I was afraid. How could I not be? I remember it so vividly; the angel appeared out of nowhere and said the strangest things to me. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" he said. My mouth was as dry as dust. My eyes as wide as saucers and my heart pounding so loudly you could have heard it through my chest...and yet I was surrounded by a deep, deep peace ...it was a wonderful terror. And then came the words, "Don't be afraid, Mary, the Almighty God is wrapping

you into the most marvelous gift to humankind. In the ongoing story of love, wonder and salvation, God wants to use you to bring the story of Joy to a world in need." And then the angel said this: "Mary, you have found favor with God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." All I could do was obey; to respond to God with my whole self. I trusted God's faithfulness to me and to all of God's people. And so in the power and majesty of that moment, I simply said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from me. I was afraid no more, for nothing is impossible with God.

Did you catch that? "I was so happy," she said. "I was filled with such joy," she said. You know, one of the most important take-aways for me in this passage is the difference between happiness and joy. Let me tease that out just a little bit. One of the very obvious differences is that happiness tends to be achieved externally, while joy is something that's achieved internally. For example, we can feel happy when we receive something like a gift or achieve something like an award or an honor. These things are external; they live on the surface of our lives. A friend gives us a present and we're suddenly delighted. We laugh or maybe we even cry, and then we go through the ritual of catching ourselves wanting to hug each other, but resorting to air high fives. And then we clap our hands. It's this happiness that lives a bit closer to the surface.

But joy, on the other hand, is something deeper. It's something we feel internally in our lives as human beings. We can experience joy in both positive and negative circumstances. When we get the text, the email, the phone call that a friend of ours has lost a parent, and our hearts are heavy, thoughts and prayers go deep into our friend's life. At the same time we experience a depth of gratitude for the loved one's life, and we feel this depth for days upon days.

Mary shows us how to know a deep joy in our lives that isn't dependent upon the daily circumstances, because we know that God is with us, God is for us... and you can hear that in her words:

"My soul sings in gratitude. I'm dancing in the mystery of God. The light of the Holy One is within me and I am blessed, so truly blessed. This goes deeper than any

human thinking. I am filled with awe at Love whose only condition is to be received. The gift is not for the proud, for they have no room for it. The strong and self-sufficient ones don't have this awareness. But those who know their emptiness can rejoice in Love's fullness. It's the Love that we are made for, the reason for our being. It fills our inmost heart space and brings to birth in us, the Holy One."

Did you catch that? Young Mary starts by announcing, "My soul sings in gratitude." Gratitude for all God has done grounds Mary in joy. Gratitude for God's promises in the present moment grounds Mary in joy in the moment. Gratitude for God's continuous presence in her life grounds Mary in joy.

As we long for joy in the midst of this season, Mary's song meets us right where we are in this third week of Advent. In the five day devotional that I've created for you this week, you will find a very practical way of experiencing Advent joy as you lean into each day this week. But I'd like us to practice leaning in right now. For just a few brief moments, let's do a meditation together. I'm going to ask you to find a comfortable position and relax, eyes open, feet on the floor, arms on the legs, hands on the lap. Now take a couple of deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. And now, with the next exhale, gently close your eyes and become aware of your breathing. And as you do that, just allow your thoughts to go where they will as I ask you a few short questions to guide your thinking.

This past year has been challenging on so many levels, in so many ways, but allow your mind to settle on one thing that has brought you joy in the midst of everything. Maybe it's related to family or another relationship, your work, your free time; just focus on something that has brought you joy.

God promises to walk with us in every moment of our life. Now allow your mind to move toward a moment in the past several weeks when you really sensed God's presence with you. Let your mind settle on a moment of connection during music or a quiet time or a time in nature when you really felt God's presence; just settle on that for a moment.

Just as Mary grounded herself in gratitude, so we are encouraged to do the same. So take a few moments to express a word of thanks to God, either out loud or silently. Holding that recollection of what you're most grateful for right now, and give thanks.

Friends, hold on to Mary's words, "My soul sings in

gratitude." In the same way, let's sing a song of joy for all that God has done. Let's sing a song of joy for all that God is doing. And let's sing a song of joy for all God still promises to do as God moves in and through each of us and out into the world. And let us sing wherever we go.