

*Mary's Joy*  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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Back in the 1998 I was at church conference at a mega-church in IL when I took a spiritual health inventory. Now, I'm a pretty upbeat person – I love to sing and dance and laugh and I've have been lucky in life. But it was a challenging time for me and my family. My husband was miserable at his job, meaning, primarily, that he was drained and irritable when he returned from his 13 hour days. Our four children were busy, but it was becoming increasingly clear that our second son was developing serious mental health problems at 13. I was trying to hold it together at home with four children while working a part-time job at church. The spiritual health inventory scored me high in faith and love for bible reading and patience...but I failed at joy. I burst into tears when I saw the results.

This morning, we light the candle of joy. Set amidst three blue candles, the pinks candle pops, as joy within sorrow breaks through.

Joy is an audacious thing to declare as we head into the longest night of the year. Our spirits are weary with news out of Washington, reports of wildfires, earthquakes, famine, hurricanes and banned words. The needs of the world are great: injustice and racism are real; and in our own lives and the lives of those whom we love, there are challenges and heart-break. We're facing health crises, dementia, depression...you can fill in the blank. And this time of year is difficult for many of us – the holidays can make us blue.

As followers of Christ, we can proclaim joy. It is a promise, a gift from God, and is not reliant on our circumstances. Joy emanates from the always-renewing spirit of God and bubbles up like water in a spring-fed lake. It can arrive without preamble even when life isn't going well. The psalmist declares that while weeping endures for the night, joy comes in the morning.

Jesus was born into a world of hurt, of political oppression, of economic injustice, and patriarchy. God did not wait until we fumbling humans got our acts together to bear something new. In fact, God needs humans to be part of the effort to save the world.

So, today we'll remember Mary, and her joy.

We don't know much about Mary except for what we read in the gospels. Tradition tells us that she was young – she certainly did not already have a child. We use words like meek and mild to describe her in hymns, but really, Mary was thoughtful, faithful, brave

and strong. Soon after Jesus' birth, she became a refugee; she had to hunt her child down when he was missing as a 12-year-old in Jerusalem; she pushed her boy to begin the work he came to do at the wedding in Cana; and she was last at that cross as he hung bleeding. She knew from the start that her road would not be an easy one.

You remember the beginning of Mary's story...

We find it in the first chapter of Luke in the 26<sup>th</sup> verse as the author tells the story of the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary and declares her favored among women. The text tells us that she was perplexed and pondered what sort of greeting this was – Mary ponders a lot in the Christmas story – working things over in her head and heart. Gabriel tells Mary that she will conceive and bear a son and will call him Jesus. He will be great, the son of the most high, and he will receive the throne of his ancestor David. And, not only that, but that HIS kingdom will have no end. Mary is, justifiably, confused, but the angel has the plan worked out. Brave and bold Mary says, “Okay, let's do this.” I would have run.

We'll pick up at verse 36, with Gabriel still speaking. I'll be using a combination of 2 translations: the NRSV for the prose and a contemporary adaptation of Mary's song.

<sup>36</sup>And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God.' <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

46 And Mary\* said,

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God!  
My heart rejoices in you, my Savior,  
because you have showered your servant with blessing!  
From now to the end of time,  
all generations will know the great things you have done for me.

Mighty One! Your name is holy!  
In every age,  
your compassion flows to those who reverence you!  
But all who seek to exalt themselves in arrogance  
will be leveled by your power.

You have deposed the mighty from their seats of power,  
and have raised the lowly to high places.  
Those who suffer hunger,  
you have filled with good things.  
Those who are privileged,  
you have turned away empty-handed.

You have come to the aid of your people,  
in fulfillment of the promise you made to our ancestors—  
when you spoke blessing to Sarah and Hagar  
and all their descendants, to the utmost generation!

How wonderful it would be if I could outline five easy steps to finding joy in everyday life...but I cannot. Rather, I'll share four observations about Mary's joy that I hope will inform us in this season.

1. Joy is a mystery. The story of Mary and Elizabeth is both earthy, fleshy and mysterious. A baby doing joy-gymnastics in his mama's womb is cool. Though babies are born every day, they are still a miracle – for each child born brings potential and hope to this world. The first time I felt our oldest son move within me the experience was amazing. It was just around Christmas time. I felt so much love. My thoughts seem to echo Elizabeth's - Who was I that I could receive this gift, this responsibility? I pray we never get so cynical that stories of angels and babies and friendship don't move us to awe.
2. Mary's joy was ignited in community. After the angel left her, Mary hurried to see her cousin. We know that suffering can often be isolating. When we are depressed or discouraged our tendency is to pull away and isolate, but often this is when we need one another the most. A couple lost a baby in a late-term miscarriage. After several weeks, the husband convinced his wife to attend church with him. She went, but simply couldn't sing, she couldn't pray. A wise parishioner told her that it was okay, "Let us pray for you, let us sing for you, let us proclaim the confessions of our faith" she said, until you feel you can pray and sing again."

3. Mary's joy did not deny reality, but accepted the truth. She sang for joy but was still pregnant, poor and unmarried. Having Jesus was not going to make her rich or powerful, in fact, she would soon know the worry, the heartbreak that her child would bring. Re-reading Mary's story this week, I've been thinking a lot about parents who have lost children to death by any means, particularly on the anniversary of the shootings in Sandy Hook.

On Wednesday our children reached out to bring some joy to a little boy who was injured in the shootings in Southerland, TX by making Christmas cards. Ryland lost his mother and two sisters in the church shootings and his family asked for Christmas greetings, as he will be in the hospital for another 6 – 8 weeks.

4. Mary's joy was rooted in God. Her song is outward focused on what God has done and will do for God's people. Her words reveal the upside-down world of the gospel where might does not make right and love wins. Mary focused on God and was lifted outside herself. Grace upon grace.

Back in IL, during that conference, after seeing the effect my failing joy grade had on me, a dear colleague saw how upset I was. I was exhausted and worried. He looked me in the eye and said, "Let's get out of here. The last thing you need is a church conference. Chicago waits for us." Mark convinced a couple more to play hooky and we saw the sights around Chicago that day. I think back on that time with great warmth. It didn't change my life, but was balm on a wound.

Created by a loving God, our hearts are strong and resilient. The God who weeps with us has also given us the capacity for joy.

This Advent, may your hearts touch joy as you revel in the mystery of incarnation, share love in worship and service, praising God for all God has done for this world and the promise of the world that is to come.

Thanks be to God. AMEN