

Plan B – Joy

Texts: I Thessalonians 5:16-24, Luke 1:46b-55
Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – December 13, 2020
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To quote the famous poem “Casey at the Bat,” “Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright; the band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light, and somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout; but there is no joy in Mudville — mighty Casey has struck out” (From Internet. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casey_at_the_Bat#Text. 12/10/20). There is no joy, at least at the beginning of Mary’s story, for Mary and Joseph. We know the background. Mary is visited by the angel and is told that she will conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, Mary – young, innocent Mary – will give birth to a Son, Jesus, the Messiah.

Imagine how that had to have been received by Mary, Joseph and their family. Clearly, there is something wrong here. Mary is a young, unmarried pregnant teenager. The shame that this fact is bringing to Mary, Joseph, and her family is unrecoverable. Life is all but ruined for all of them. So, in the verses just before our Scripture text for today, Mary sets out for Judea in a hurry. I have to wonder if her trip to stay with Zechariah and Elizabeth is her idea or her parents. They may have hurried her off to get her away from the shunning and shame. Either way, it is an opportunity for Mary to get away from the scrutiny and judgment, to have a chance to clear her head and figure things out. Surely Elizabeth must know what she is going through as she is pregnant and in a situation that is outside the norm.

When Mary arrives at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Elizabeth’s baby leaps in her womb – for joy – and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth then calls Mary blessed. Blessed. Did Mary feel blessed at that moment? Did she sense the presence of the Spirit in the same way that Elizabeth did? Or was she down, feeling as if life could be over for her? Sure,

she had this wonderful encounter with the angel, but as time passed, did that feeling subside? She had so much to lose, and would possibly be faced with starting her life over again, at age 12 or 13. Did she just need a do over?

It would be so easy for us today to justify wanting and needing a do over. This year has been the toughest by far for most of us. We have faced loss, difficulties, and tragedy. And in this season of hope, peace and now joy, are we feeling the joy? Or are we feeling just the opposite? Is our world more filled with frustration, anger, sadness, grief? Can we hope to find the joy this Christmas season after the year that we have had?

Elizabeth called Mary blessed. Are we feeling truly blessed? Surely there is much for each of us to be thankful for, but let us face it. It is so much easier to feel sorry for ourselves – to forget the blessings God has given to us – to hold the pity party of one – to focus on the negative side of things. I know that I have fallen into that trap more times than I care to admit. This week, I had a conversation with someone who believed differently than I do about the virus. And I got frustrated pretty quickly. I wanted this person to believe as I do – for it is easier that way. Actually, it was easier to just dismiss them. I had to take a deep breath and just realize that we were not going to agree on this topic. But it was still frustrating.

It has been that kind of year. It has been hard, at times, to find the joy. And it has been harder still to live out the joy. In the first Scripture reading that was read during the lighting of the candle of joy, Paul writes, “Rejoice always.” Boy, that is tough, is it not? There are times when I do not want to rejoice. There are times when joy is just hard to find amidst all of the problems, stresses, busyness, and annoyances. How do we find the joy of the Lord and the blessing of God Almighty in this season of the year – in where we are right now at the end of 2020?

Mary found her joy. Mary realized she was indeed blessed. Jan Richardson, artist, writer and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, writes, “In the home of Elizabeth, in the company of her cousin who is herself pregnant in most unusual circumstances, Mary finds what she most needs. Elizabeth gathers and enfolds her. Welcomes her. Blesses her.

In response to Elizabeth’s blessing, Mary sings. And how she sings! She sings of a God who brings down the powerful, who lifts up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things. Strangely, wonderfully, Mary sings of a God who not only *will* do these things, but who *has* done these things. She sings as if God has already accomplished the redemption and restoration of the world.

O my friends, this is what a blessing has the power to do. The blessing that Elizabeth speaks and enacts through her words, her welcome, her gift of sanctuary: such a blessing has the power to help us, like Mary, speak the word we most need to offer. Such a blessing gives us a glimpse of the redemption that God, in God’s strange sense of time, has somehow already accomplished. Such a blessing stirs up in us the strength to participate with God in bringing about this redemption in *this* time, in *this* world. Where will we go, like Mary, to find and receive such a blessing? How will we open our heart, like Elizabeth, to offer it?” (From Internet. <http://adventdoor.com/2015/12/14/advent-4-a-blessing-called-sanctuary/>. 12/07/20).

Mary does find her blessing and shares this beautiful song of praise to God. Her soul glorifies the Lord – her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. She rejoices because of what the Lord has done for her. She has been humble while her God has been mighty. And in verses 50 through 55, we hear Mary’s words telling about the awe-inspiring power of her God.

This is why she can be called blessed. This is why she can find and experience joy despite the tough times she faces, the whispers behind her and Joseph’s backs. This is why she

can look to her support system, her people, like Elizabeth, who have her back and can be there for her and understand what she is going through. I can imagine that Elizabeth experienced her own whispers and scrutiny being an old and barren woman who finally conceived. Mary is blessed. Mary rejoices.

Friends, we can rejoice because we are blessed. Look at what God has done for each of us in sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to the world to die for us. And no matter the craziness out there, in those moments when you are not sure what to believe on the news, regardless of our differences in the virus and what we are doing to stay safe and virus-free, the Lord has done great things for us.

And so we rejoice, even and especially when joy is hard to come by. We rejoice, when we are down and full of fear and doubt. We rejoice, despite those whispers and troubled relationships in our own lives because God has called us His blessing. We rejoice, because we have our people, our support, our community of faith, our church family. We pray for and with one another, we support one another, we reach out to one another with the love of Jesus Christ. We rejoice, because we humble ourselves before the God who created us, redeemed us through Christ, and sustains us through His Holy Spirit – each and every day – in pandemic and out of pandemic – for all of eternity. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Be blessed. Share it all.

Let us pray...

God of exceedingly great joy, we admit and confess that we have not been full of joy this season – this year. Much has caused our spirits and wills to be dampened and down. Yet, we see Mary today – in all that she faced – sing a song of rejoicing and praise to You. Let our songs be joyful. Let our lives reflect the rejoicing of Mary. We thank You, Lord, for blessing us and calling us Your own. In Christ's name, Amen.