

God With Us – 3:Bringing Joy
Isaiah 1:39-56
December 11, 2022
Pastor Bethany Nelson

God is with us bringing hope. Bringing peace. And today? Bringing joy. This Advent, we have focused on God's promise to be Emmanuel: God with us. Trusting that our ability to understand God's entrance into the world thru Jesus makes an impact on how we see God's continued presence in the world around us today.

From creation, ours is a God who has desired to be with God's people. In the garden. In the wilderness. In captivity and exile. In cities and small towns, in the lives of people young and old. And always, God is with those least expected: those who are marginalized and oppressed. Those who have been harmed or looked down upon. Those who seem questionable or suspicious. To them, and to any of you who have felt like your 'aren't enough' — God is with you, too.

The Christmas story isn't just a story of God taking on flesh and being "with us" in our world. It's a story of the endurance of hope and joy, even when it seems impossible. Today, we hear the story of two women, Elizabeth and Mary, whose lives have been forever changed by the words of an angel and promises of God. But their stories sound like something from a movie... They could be the voices of Rey from Star Wars, a nobody from the desert who survives tragedy and fights with the resistance. They could be the women of the Amazon who fought and trained Wonder Woman, fiercely protecting their land and their people from outsiders. They could be the young revolutionaries in France, barricading the streets of Paris in Les Mis... *Do you hear the people sing? Singing the song of angry men. It is the music of the people who will not be slaves again. When the beating of your heart Echoes the beating of the drums There is a life about to start When tomorrow comes!*

Like uprisers before them, Elizabeth and Mary have a clear vision of a new world, a new life. And like many resisters, their hopes and dreams come together in song. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me tell you about these women: Elizabeth is a cousin of Mary's. We're told she and her husband Zechariah had tried for years to have children. Now, she is past child-bearing years - and her tears of dried. But over the years, we know they have cried the tears of many women know well — of another month gone by, another miscarriage, another missed dream. They've prayed and wondered so long, that now it seemed their years of parenthood had passed. But now, the angel of God has come to an ordinary and faithful couple to a small village outside of Jerusalem, and God tells them they will have a child. And theirs will be John the Baptist, the one sent to prepare the way of God.

Moving north, to an ordinary Galilean girl, an angel of God visits again. This time, announcing a pregnancy to a young woman, not yet married, who is barely grown, and hardly thinking about motherhood. To her, God says: you will be the mother of God's son. You have been chosen to be the mother of God. This young woman, while shocked, consents to God's gifts and takes off quickly, traveling to her cousin Elizabeth, whom she knows is also pregnant. While Mary has said yes, she certainly still has many questions and worries. Her family would not approve, her community would not understand. The little reputation she had would be easily ruined, her life wiped out. She lived in an occupied area, where roman soldiers often got women "into trouble," - she knew the stares and judgements ahead of her. Mary's too is the story many young women know — those who have hugged their bellies in the night and wondered how this life within them

might be. Those who have feared and worried what would be – even as their hearts filled with love.

For 8-10 days Mary travelled to see Elizabeth. No doubt praying and crying, hoping for answers and a guidance for how she could be...the mother of God. She comes to the home of Elizabeth, which is where our story picks up today. From Luke's Gospel:

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice Elizabeth blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

With all evidence to the contrary, Mary is told she has found favor with God. Elizabeth sees the goodness of Mary and celebrates this gift. The greek phrase tells us Elizabeth shouts, using her "outside voice" to exclaim with joy God's blessings. And she, is the first woman to call Jesus LORD. I imagine her joy overwhelms Mary, tired from traveling, wiping away her fears of all the ways she is "not enough" in their world - her economic position, her gender, her location and marital status. When everything around her says "no, not you" ... Elizabeth affirms God's YES in a big a beautiful way.

And already, even as the angels are just announcing these pregnancies - we get the sense that God is at work weaving together people across generational and cultural lines, across geography, too — showing us that God's presence knows no bounds. Even more than that, God is showing up in an occupied territory where peace seems impossible. And where there is a clear distinction between the strong and powerful and the weak. God is here, but not on the side of the empire. Instead, God is here, with the old woman and the young. In a vulnerable womb. And right here, God is declaring that even in this place, there is peace and life will bloom. Even here, right in the middle of everything that is hard: God brings joy.

There is a story about Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor and author, who tells about a fellow prisoner who traded a ration of bread for materials to make a menorah during Hanukkah. Shocked the man would trade something so essential, Wiesel asked, Hanukkah in Auschwitz? The man replied: Especially in Auschwitz."

In the middle of our deepest pain and darkness, joy is essential to our thriving and living. And the more bleak our circumstances, the more we need markers of joy. It is this JOY that moves Mary to sing. A sense of joy that even when everything in the world could go wrong, she *knows* God is with her. She trusts God's promises will be fulfilled. This is joy as resistance to the bleakness of the world around her.

Mary's song is called the *Magnificat* and is a song that echos the words of *another* woman in scripture. A woman, a prophet, named Hannah, who had also longed for a child, and waiting on God's action and promises in her life. Echoing then, the words of women before her, Mary sings. She sings a song that praises God and one that describes the world as God would have it: a world where there is peace and justice. Where the strong are brought down, their towers crumbled. A world where the hungry are filled with riches, and the powerful go away hungry. It is a song of joy rooted in God's promised justice. Mary sings, trusting that this child whom she now carries, will bring about a revolution and change the world. Listen to her words, and imagine the world in which she sings:

Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. God has looked with favor on the low status of their servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is God's name. God shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. God has shown strength with their arm. God has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. God has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering God's mercy, just as promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Can you hear the power of Mary's voice? The joy as she sings a song of revolution for the world to come? It reminds me of the vision of a new heaven and earth from Revelation 21: But here, Mary sings a song for the poor and powerless, declaring a day when God will bring a change to the world, and all will be cared for, their needs met. She sees the role reversals of the powerful and weak, the rich and poor. She sings of a new world where God's justice and mercy prevail.

Mary's Joy brings strength for all that is ahead. For the long days and nights of pregnancy. For the judgement she will receive, and all the "regular" fears of motherhood. Her joy is a song of protection for the days ahead - when young Jesus will get lost in the temple. When the rulers begin to plot and pursue him. This song of joy is her armor for the day when Jesus will carry his cross, and his life ended because of his message of love. Mary's song of joy is an act of resistance, that even while the world is not as it should be... that God is here. With us and for us. Mary knows that God's saving action is already here with us. And thru the Magnificat, we can imagine the world as it would be, when Christ the king rules through love.

This is a song that protesters and prophets around the world have clung to as their song of hope. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor executed by Nazis, called this song the most "passionate and revolutionary hymn ever sung." And like all songs of revolution, it is a dangerous one. During the British rule of India, this song was prohibited from being sung in church. Again in the 1980's the Guatemalan government prohibited its singing, too. And when Luther first translated scripture into German, they left the Magnificat in Latin - too powerful to be translated. Because hope is dangerous. Joy is powerful. When you trust in God's presence and power, even when everything points to the opposite - then the powerful have no hold on you. Then, you are the weak made strong. The oppressed who find their standing.

Mary doesn't lose her voice in the midst of fear. She finds it. And as she stands in the arms of her cousin Elizabeth, their wombs greeting one another with joy, Mary sings a song of liberation. And as their bellies grew, so too did their understanding of God's work and mighty deeds among them. Their bodies became visible, tangible reminders of God's hope and joy being birthed into the world. Mary seemed to know what we so often forget: God is with us already. And God cares deeply about our lives and our world. God desires so strongly to make a home with us, that God will take on flesh, becoming a vulnerable, adorable baby... without power or a throne. And among the first sounds the Christ-child hears from the womb, will be the voice of his mother. Strong and brave and filled with joy. Singing a melody that will carry him throughout his life, an image of a world where God raises up the weak and lowly, and restores the world to God's intended creation. Where all people are known, seen, and beloved.

I wonder if this song of praise became the lullaby for which Christ was rocked to sleep. The words he sung as he prepared to preach in the temple or feed the multitudes. Was it the song beating in his heart as we walked the streets, holding his cross. Was this song, the song of Christ's revolution and source of joy? he song his life lived, and died to tell?

God is with us bringing hope. Bringing peace. And today? Bringing joy. This Advent, we have focused on God's promise to be Emmanuel: God with us. Trusting that our ability to understand God's entrance into the world thru Jesus makes an impact on how we see God's continued presence in the world around us today. Beloveds of God, this song is your inheritance. The song of Mary, the songs of Jesus, they are yours to sing and proclaim, too. I hear your song of joy unleashed and love without bounds sung harmoniously through our work together at Messiah Church. In the ways that we care for children, nearby and abroad, especially through our partnerships with Bloom and Imara. In the ways that we feed the hungry, through our work with area food shelves. In your faithfulness and commitment to seeking God's wisdom for your lives. And in the ways that you make known the powerful love of Christ in your words and actions.

The joy your songs carry have been handed down by generations past, but will be carried forward by the next generations. Because, people of God, ours is a faith that is ready to be shared, ready to be sung. Proclaiming to all the world, that God is with us, bringing hope, peace, and joy for everyone.

Let us pray:

Holy and merciful God, you have been faithful to us, your children, always. And though we are forgetful, and live in a world that is not as you intend - you continue to call us back to you, to make your home among us. Give us songs of joy and revolution to sing, just as you gave to Mary. Make us a people who seek you each day, who align our visions and hopes for the world with yours. That your kingdom come, your will be done. Set our eyes upon Jesus, the perfecter and restorer of our lives and faith. In the name of the Christ child, we pray. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 11, 2022

Weekly Prayer

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee. Amen.

Monday, December 12

Scripture: Luke 1:39-41

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Observation

Young Mary, having received news that she would be the Mother of the Christ-child, hurried to visit Elizabeth (also finding herself unexpectedly pregnant). It would have taken Mary 8-10 days to travel to Elizabeth, and I imagine her walking included many prayers to God for peace, companionship, and guidance. When Elizabeth saw Mary, she responded immediately with joy! An answered prayer.

Application

Mary, as a young pregnant woman, would not have had high social status. She had many things to worry about, including the reputation and care of herself, her child, and family. But in Elizabeth's greeting, Mary was reminded that God valued her, and found great joy in Mary and

her faithfulness. Do you need reminders that God finds great joy in you? Beloved, no matter the situations in your life, God looks upon you with great joy and delight.

Prayer

God of all creation, you have created me and called me your beloved. Help me to see myself, and others, through your eyes. Amen.

Tuesday, December 13

Scripture: Luke 1:41-47

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Observation

I've always loved the image of Elizabeth greeting Mary. Two women who are unexpectedly connected by a shared experience. And through their own worries and questions, they find joy and companionship in one another. What a gift Elizabeth's joy must have been to a nervous and young Mary.

Application

Who has been your companion in life and faith? A person who has shared your joys, heard your worries, and walked alongside you? And who, in your life, might be seeing God revealed through your words and actions?

Prayer

Almighty God, you promise to be with us always, through every time and season. We know that one way you are with us is through the people who accompany us through life. Thank you for these persons, and the joy they bring. Help us be a source of our joy and light to others. Amen.

Wednesday, December 14

Scripture: Luke 1:50-53

He shows mercy to everyone,
 from one generation to the next,
 who honors him as God.
He has shown strength with his arm.
He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.
He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
 and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
 and sent the rich away empty-handed.

Observation

Mary's song brings images of a world changed, turned upside down. The arrogant and proud are scattered. The powerful are made weak. The rich are turned away. And now, the hungry, the lowly, the oppressed are lifted up: revered and honored. God is always on the side of the oppressed and marginalized, looking "with favor" upon them.

Application

Many of our favorite Christmas movies tell the story of a changed heart (consider the Grinch or Scrooge). Stories where one who is selfish, finds their heart changed and opened to care for those around them. Stories where those who are marginalized or oppressed are honored. How might God be inviting your heart to be opened this year? How might we honor those around us, looking “with favor” upon God’s beloved in our midst?

Prayer

Gentle God, have mercy on me. I long to follow you closely, but I easily get in my own way. Open my eyes and heart to care for those around me, loving others as you love. Change my heart and fill me with a hunger for your justice and mercy, Amen.

Thursday, December 15

Scripture: Psalm 30:5b

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Observation

The Psalmist is reflecting on a time of trouble, where sleep feels far from reach. We don’t know the specific situation that keeps the Psalmist weeping, but we can hear their trust in God’s promised joy. Scholar Donald Williams wrote in a commentary on the Psalms, "In [the psalmist’s] illness there has been weeping, the sense of God's absence, and mourning. Now...the healing of God has turned sorrow into joy." (Donald Williams, *The Preacher’s Commentary Series, Volume 13: Psalms 1–72*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986, p. 239).

Application

We’ve all had sleepless nights, where worry or weeping keep us up. One promise of this season is that even in times more unexpected, God will show up. Not always as we anticipate, but faithfully: God is with us. Can you think of times when “dawn” has come, and God has brought a joy in the morning?

Prayer

Lord, be with us and bring your peace and joy. When our “weeping lingers for the night,” remind us of your promised presence. Amen.

Friday, December 16

Scripture: Psalm 126

When the LORD changed Zion’s circumstances for the better,
it was like we had been dreaming.

Our mouths were suddenly filled with laughter;
our tongues were filled with joyful shouts.

It was even said, at that time, among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them!”

Yes, the LORD has done great things for us,
and we are overjoyed.

LORD, change our circumstances for the better,
like dry streams in the desert waste!

Let those who plant with tears
reap the harvest with joyful shouts.

Let those who go out,
crying and carrying their seed,
come home with joyful shouts,
carrying bales of grain!

Observation

Israel's long history includes many times of misery and oppression. But it also includes a reliable presence from God to deliver God's people. Psalm 126 recounts God's ability to turn their weeping to shouts of joy.

Application

The Psalmist is remembering accounts of God's faithfulness in their writing, "God has done great things for us, and we rejoiced." Their story includes God's faithfulness to deliver them. Do you remember a time when God did "great things" in your life? How do you keep that memory alive?

Prayer

Redeeming God, thank you for the times in my life when you did great things for me, and your people. This Christmas, remind me that the birth of Your Son is a gift of love and redemption. Help me to live in confidence that you will always be with us, turning our sorrows to joy. Amen.

Saturday, December 17

Scripture: Psalm 98: 4-6

Shout triumphantly to the LORD, all the earth!
Be happy!
Rejoice out loud!
Sing your praises!
Sing your praises to the LORD with the lyre—
with the lyre and the sound of music.
With trumpets and a horn blast,
shout triumphantly before the LORD, the king!

Observation

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" Again and again, throughout scripture and song, God calls us to be filled with JOY - trusting that God is with us, and that the goodness of God invites us to be people of praise. As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, let "heaven and nature sing"!

Application:

It is easy to be swept up in the busyness of this season, letting our calendars or 'to do' lists guide our days. Take time today for joy. Consider the gifts of God in your life, including the people and places God has been revealed to you. Make a list, and offer a prayer of thanks to God, the joy of the world.

Prayer

God of love, thank you for this day. Help me to acknowledge the ways you are present in my life, and the gifts you have given. Guide me, to find joy in your presence today and always. Amen.