

Two weeks ago, Nelson and I took our son Dean to go see the Bull Run Festival of Lights in Northern Virginia. This is a tradition that we have started with Dean since he was a baby. But this was the first year that he finally got it. The whole way through the park he sat in awe as he looked at the thousands of brightly colored lights.

This season of Advent, we are also excited about the lights of Christmas. So many of us put up our Christmas trees and decorations early because we were craving the light and joy of Christmas. As Ed Robb said in his book “Making Room”: “Light is ever so much more radiant when it pierces the darkness.”¹ During this pandemic it seems that we have been in a season of darkness and uncertainty. And yet, Scripture reminds us that God continues to work in the darkness.

In fact, the first work of God was to bring light from the darkness. In Genesis 1 God said: “Let there be light” and since that moment God has been bringing light out of the darkness. This season of Advent we celebrate that Christ continues to be the light of the world illuminating the darkness of our lives. Each week the Advent wreath shines brighter and brighter and we await the birth once again of Christ into our lives.

This third Sunday of Advent we celebrate Christ our joy as we journey alongside Mary.

Mary was a teenage girl who God chose to do a mighty work: carry, bear, and raise the Christ child. God’s choice of Mary reiterates God’s countercultural love of lifting the lowly. Mary had a lot to lose in answering God’s call. She was a poor teenager and commentary tells us that she was “a peasant woman from the tribe of Judah, and in the line of King David.”²

In that day, Jewish women did not go to the synagogue to learn scripture, but were instead taught how to be a wife and take care of the home.³ We see that Mary was following the normal trajectory of her time. She was betrothed to Joseph, which meant that she had already entered a legally binding contract to marry him and that he had already made a payment, a bride price, to Mary’s family upon their engagement.⁴ For all legal purposes Mary and Joseph were married, but they had most likely entered into the yearlong period before they consummated their marriage.

When Mary encountered the angel Gabriel. It must be said that joy was not the first feeling that Mary experienced.

In fact, she may have been in shock. Imagine a teenager hearing this kind of news. Think of the teenagers in your life and how they might handle news like this. How can anyone even process news like this?

I am sure that Mary was fearful to become pregnant with a baby that was not Joseph’s because, in this time, becoming pregnant out of wedlock was, in most cases, punishable by death. She probably had so many thoughts running through her mind about what was going to happen to her. During this time, men got married in their teens if they had the means to support a family, and women could be married as early as twelve.⁵ So Mary may have been as young as twelve years old when God called her to this mighty task.

The amazing part of this Scripture is when Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she would bear the Christ-child, her only question was, “How could this be since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34) The angel told her how the Holy Spirit would place the child in her womb which was a miracle. He also told her that her much older cousin Elizabeth was pregnant to show that God could do anything.

Mary didn’t ask, “Why me?” She didn’t say, “Let me think about that and I’ll get back to you next week.” She said something profound: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Even from the very beginning Mary gave of her whole self to do the work of God.

In our Scripture for today from the gospel of Luke we see Mary has had some more time to think about the great miracle that had taken place in her life. We now find that she has traveled to be with her cousin Elizabeth. Mary models for us that it is okay to seek affirmation from the community of faith and it is okay to take a trip or make a call and talk to a trusted friend or family member when God is moving in your life.

Upon seeing her cousin Mary, Scripture tells us “the child leapt in [Elizabeth’s] womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’” (Luke 1: 41-42). Mary first received this blessing of joy from her cousin Elizabeth who was full of the Holy Spirit rejoicing in what God had done in Mary. It is after Mary receives this blessing from her family member that she responds with her song of praise also known as “the Magnificat.”

Mary starts her song with the words: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his

servant” (Luke 1:46-48a). Just as God saved the Israelites over and over again, God will continue to make a way for God’s people. Mary reminds us that just as God said a blessing over Abraham and his family, God continues to offer us blessings each day. We miss out on these blessings of God’s joy when we are too busy, or worried, or stressed out. We miss out when we do not join in praising God with the community of faith. We miss out on the gift of joy in Jesus Christ when we forget that God’s joy cannot be taken away from us, even in the midst of despair.

Our Gospel lesson today reminds us that joy is a choice that we make every day. So, I invite you to choose joy.

We choose joy when we celebrate alongside the prophet Isaiah that God continues to “bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, comfort all who mourn, and gives us garland instead of ashes” (Isaiah 61). Here we see that God continues to use garland to remind us of the promises of God. Maybe there is something biblical about decorating for Christmas.

We choose joy when we like the psalmist rejoice in God’s greatness. We choose joy when we believe Psalm 30:5 that “weeping may stay for the night, but [joy] comes in the morning.” Every day we have a choice to let the darkness win or to choose the light.

We choose to follow the light of Christ when we remember that we always have good news to share, that we always have something to be thankful for, and that we can hold feelings of grief and joy hand and hand knowing that God will lead us forward in the promise of tomorrow.

How will you choose joy today? Will it be in the action of hanging some Christmas garland or leaving on your Christmas lights on a little longer? Will it be in lighting a candle as the sun sets? Will it be in watching the sunrise and the beauty of creation?

As Christians, joy is what sets us apart from those who do not believe. The mark of the Christian is the ability to continue to have joy even during great opposition and struggle. When others see this joy within us even in times of darkness like these, they know that God is working and moving in our lives.

I will never forget the first funeral I participated in as a pastor intern. I was 19 years old and the pastor of my home church invited me to participate in a memorial service for a child that died when he was born two months premature. My role in the service was singing the song: “Joy Comes with the Dawn.” I thought what an odd choice of a song for a funeral. But as I learned the song, I understood that these words from Psalm 30 were the words that were bringing comfort to this grieving mother and her family.

After the service, she profusely thanked me for participating and she gave me a gift. A beautiful little box with the inscription: “You are the light of the world” from Matthew 5. This same box now sits on my desk and reminds me what it means to have true joy in Christ. That no matter what is going on in our lives that we are called to follow and embody the light of Christ.

The good news for our lives today is that Christ our joy invites us to share this joy with others as we are led to serve by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God continues to encourage us to embody this same light of Christ to the world and gives us signs that the darkness is not overcoming the light. My favorite part of Christmas Eve every year is when we sing “Silent Night” and light the candles. We start in darkness, but little by little, everything is illumined with the light of Christ. We are charged to take this same light of Christ beyond the doors of the church so that all may know of the joy of Jesus.

What is amazing about this year is that we will get to see a sign of joy in the sky, the very same sign that Mary and the magi witnessed. News outlets are reporting that on December 21ST: “you can witness a rare event in the night sky that has not been seen in almost eight centuries. The two largest planets in our solar system will align to create the ‘Star of Bethlehem.’”⁶ This event is a reminder of the joy and hope that the Christ-child brings to our lives. May we continue to search for the light of Christ even in seasons of darkness. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Ed Robb. “Making Room.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2020. P. 50

² Patricia Chadwick, *Mary Mother of Jesus, History's Women*: <http://www.historyswomen.com/womenoffaith/mary.htm>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mark Wilson. “Were Mary and Joseph Married or Engaged at Jesus’ Birth?” Biblical Archeology Society. December 24, 2019. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bibleinterpretation/were-mary-and-joseph-married-or-engaged-at-jesus-birth/>.

⁵ Patricia Chadwick. “Mary Mother of Jesus.” Online: <http://www.historyswomen.com/womenoffaith/mary.htm>.

⁶ <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2020/december/rare-star-of-bethlehem-to-appear-dec-21-heres-what-astronomy-says-about-the-biblical-star-at-christs-birth>.