

Something amazing happens every year when I decorate for Christmas. I don't know about you, but every time I pull out the Christmas decorations, I am flooded with memories of Christmas past. Each time I hang an ornament on the tree I recall a different memory. Every time I take out my nativity set given to me by my mother, I remember all the special Christmases my sister and I had at our parents' house. I think this is why decorating for Christmas brings me so much joy. It is not simply about making a room look beautiful, it is about being surrounded by the beautiful memories of family and friends.

There are so many things during the season of Advent that bring us joy. Whether it is lighting the Advent candles, putting up the Christmas or Chrismon tree, or singing Christmas carols together, there are so many beautiful moments of joy leading up to Christmas. This Sunday, the third week of Advent, we celebrate Christ our joy through Mary's song of praise.

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 up the lowly. 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. Upon seeing her cousin Mary, Scripture tells us "the child leapt in [Elizabeth's] 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'" (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” which is named after “the first word of its first line in Latin: “My soul magnifies the Lord.”<sup>i</sup>

**This third Sunday of Advent Mary calls us to experience joy alongside her in the gift of Jesus Christ.**

In our Advent Study book “Almost Christmas,” Matt Rawle writes about embodying joy this season of Advent. Rawle describes the difference between an almost joy and an altogether joy. He says, “An almost joy, although powerful, never remains...”<sup>ii</sup> He says, “An altogether joy comes from an encounter with [God’s] mercy, not from the things we do leading up to Christmas.”<sup>iii</sup>

You see the Christmas decorations will come and go and we may feel a little emptiness inside once we pack them away, but God’s gift of joy remains and as Rawle says, it is “timeless.”<sup>iv</sup>

It is interesting to see the different expressions of joy in the Bible. In our Scripture from Isaiah today we see that even the land participated in rejoicing. Isaiah 35 tells us “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing” (Isaiah 35:1-2a).

We see that since we were created, we have been called to respond to God with rejoicing and praise. Psalm 139 tells us: “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

We see that throughout the Old Testament rejoicing has taken on the form of music. Psalm 150:3-6 instructs us how to praise God: “Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!”

Rejoicing and praising God has taken on many different forms in the Bible, most which were loud, that is why it is interesting that Matt Rawle points out that rejoicing can also take place in the silence.

Through our Bible study this week we focused on Luke 1:11-20 where Zechariah encounters the angel Gabriel who tells him that he and his wife will be parents even though they are both up in age. Zechariah questioned the angel which led to him not being able to speak until after his son was born.

Now if we were Zechariah, I don't think many of us would consider becoming mute to be a joyful experience. Rawle reflected on this Scripture and said, “Perhaps Zechariah's silence was a gift rather than a curse, an opportunity given by the angel for Zechariah to experience joy as he looked forward to his son's birth...slowing down to leave room for joy often takes more listening than speaking.”<sup>v</sup>

This Scripture calls us to ask the question. How are we experiencing joy in the silence?

Silence is not something we get much of during this season of Advent. There are so many activities to participate in and places to go and people to see. But if we do slow down, we remember it was in the silence that Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, met Zechariah and Mary to tell them wonderful news. Through Gabriel's pronouncement to both Zechariah and Mary we remember that God meets us in the silence and offers us joy.

This is why the Living Nativity event that we do is so powerful. People know the story in their hearts, but it is another thing to see it enacted live. In the silence we see again the story coming alive reminding us that we too are part of God's story today.

You see in the proclamation of the coming Messiah; the angel Gabriel gave Mary an incredible gift. She was now a part of Christ's story. Mary's song of praise reminds us experiencing joy is a gift.

The joy of Christ is not something we can take it is something we have to receive. We see the gift of Jesus Christ embodied through the sacrament of Holy Communion. We cannot take the bread; we have to come to communion with our hands outstretched waiting to receive God's grace. God offers us this gift of grace each day, but we must receive it.

Mary certainly did not ask to be the mother of Christ, and yet she embraced this role. She received this gift of joy and gave thanks to God.

So often in life our first response to unexpected situations is not joy. Yet God reminds us that even when things go unexpectedly, God continues to offer us joy.

Mary embodies this gift of joy as she connects the dots that God is still offering grace to God’s people, but now in a new way through Jesus Christ. 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 God. 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.

Last Sunday we shared a lot of beautiful moments with all who were gathered for Athena Bywaters’ Memorial Service. Tears were shed and laughs were had as we celebrated Athena’s life. Although it was a sad day of missing Athena, there was a feeling of hope and joy in the room as we all believed that Athena has claimed the promise of everlasting life and is no longer in pain or suffering.

Matt Rawle reminds us that “Joy can happen even in the midst of despair [because] joy is the steadfast assurance that God is with us.”<sup>vi</sup> Psalm 30 tells us “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:5b). With the promise of each new day is the joy that God offers to us in the gift of Jesus Christ.

**The good news for our lives today is that we always have something to be joyful about even on our worst days because we have already been offered the gift of Jesus Christ. At all times and in all places, we sit in the presence of God.**

I think many of us felt the presence of God very strongly as we went caroling yesterday. We were able to spend time with people in two different nursing homes as well as do some home visits. It was amazing to see that even people who were unable to recognize loved ones were able to recognize the words of joy of these songs.

They were still able to participate in Christ’s joy and even though some were unable to sing, you could see the joy dancing in their eyes.

These moments were beautiful and filled with joy. It is an amazing thing when the community of God can join together and praise God for the gift of Jesus Christ. At each place we visited we were part of that family together if only for a moment.

This season of Advent, may we like Mary open ourselves up to receiving God’s joy for our lives. This means that no matter what life may throw us we choose to be joyful anyway. This is the mark of a Christian, someone who can hold unto joy even in the midst of despair.

May we remember that Christ offers us the gift of joy anew each day, but it is up to us to receive it. Receive again today Christ’s gift of joy in Mary’s song of praise. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

#### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Magnificat>

<sup>ii</sup> Matt Rawle et al. “Almost Christmas.” Abington: Nashville, TN. 2019. P. 86.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. P. 93.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. P. 94.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. P. 87-88.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid. P. 96.

#### Additional Resource

Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible.” Vol IX. 1995.