

Waiting for the King: Wisdom from an Expectant Mom

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46-55

Sermon:

Good morning! Today we light the Joy candle in our Advent wreaths. Joy. Rejoicing. What would make you rejoice? What would cause you to celebrate wildly, with total abandon? What would make you dance like nobody's watching? Maybe it is good news of recovery from sickness of a loved one. Maybe it's getting that job you've been desperate for. Maybe it's a vaccine that works and is available to all and ends this pandemic disruption! What would you do? Dance, sing, shout! Call up your friends and share the exciting news.

When I was in college, we won the NCAA national men's basketball championship. All over campus people just poured out into the streets and celebrated. We ran and laughed and sang. Strangers hugged strangers. People started dancing and chanting and singing our school songs spontaneously. There were huge grins on everyone's faces. In fact, my face hurt later because I'd been smiling so much! Rejoicing is powerful! You can't miss it when someone is rejoicing!

This year, as we move through Advent, maybe you aren't feeling the joy. Maybe rejoicing is the furthest thing from your mind right now. That is understandable in 2020, isn't it? There are lots of empty places at our tables—some are temporarily empty, while others are gone forever. We are missing so much—our loved ones; job security; our peace of mind. Many of us are sick or worried about those who are. Many are lonely and disconnected from others and don't know how to reconnect well. Many are watching the news 24/7 and are drowning in fear and outrage and anger. Is joy even possible this year?

Today we are focusing on Mary as she approaches Christmas—the birth of her firstborn child. Think about her situation. She was a teen age girl. She lived in a little town up in the hills, called Nazareth. She was poor. On the social ladder Mary was on the very bottom rung. She was engaged to be married to guy in the town who was a workman—also poor but they'd be able to make a life together. Mary did not have much going for her except for hope of a

making a family with Joseph. Then she had this weird experience where some . . . being; some . . . one showed up and told her she was going to have a baby, even though she had never been with a man.

Think about what that meant for her. Would Joseph break off their marriage? Probably. Would he publicly shame her? He could even have her stoned for adultery. Would she be abandoned, with a newborn to care for and no way to earn money? For the rest of her life, she would be *that* woman, the one who was dirty, immoral, bad. And her baby would have to live with the shame of being illegitimate. In an honor/shame culture like hers, this pregnancy meant the end of hope. Mary went from being on the bottom rung of the social ladder to falling off it completely. Mary had nothing to celebrate as she waited for Christmas. Nothing at all.

Except. Except for what that angel told her—the Lord is with you, the holy one born to you will be great and will be the king and will be called the Son of God. What does that mean? Did it really happen? Each day as her body changed and the fact of her pregnancy became more and more unmistakable, both the fear of rejection and the hope of the angel’s message came closer.

Luke tells us that Mary left town and went to visit her cousin Elizabeth—who was old and also unexpectedly pregnant with the baby who would become John the Baptist. Elizabeth was radiant after years of fruitless trying. As she is talking to her older cousin, we see how Mary was reacting to her unexpected pregnancy and all that came with it. Was she scared? Despondent? No! Shockingly, Mary is joyful. She is celebrating! She breaks into song. She says My spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior. Listen to how the Message puts it—“I’m bursting with God-news; I’m dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one good look at me, and look what happened—I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!” Do you hear the party in her voice? Can you see the celebration spilling out and overflowing?

Mary looks past all of the threatening circumstances that surround her and instead trusts what God is doing. Instead of focusing on her external situation, she is joyful because of God is faithful and is on her side. Today we read the song that she launches into. It is one of the best loved parts of the whole Bible. It is called Mary’s Song or the Magnificat (which is from

its first word in Latin). It is prayed and read and sung and whispered by believers many, many times each week all around the world. Mary responded to all of the fear and uncertainty of her unplanned pregnancy with joy and hope and trust in the God who is at work. God isn't absent or far away, he is at work keeping his promises. Despite everything, Mary can't contain her rejoicing. She can't believe that God would choose her—HER! But he has. That is how God works—Jesus was born in a manger, not a palace. Jesus was raised to glory on a cross, not a throne. God chooses the most unlikely people and circumstances for his rescue mission!

Mary's Song is a deep, rich, profound explanation of what was happening. Almost every word and phrase echo the Hebrew Scriptures that Mary grew up hearing. She understands how this miraculous birth fits into the story of God. It is happening at last! God is keeping his promises! She can't contain herself. Despite all the risk and reasons to be afraid, Mary chooses to trust and to celebrate! Maybe we all can imitate Mary this year. We choose to trust that God is still in control, despite 2020. We can celebrate what God is doing instead of fearing what might happen.

Mary's Song resounds with hope, trust and joy. She is not saying what God *will* do, someday, she is announcing what God *has already* done! God is keeping his promises through this pregnancy! Mary's song describes what God's kingdom looks like. It is an upside down kingdom compared to how our world works. She proclaims that God scatters the proud, he brings down the rulers, the oppressors, from their positions, he fills the hungry with good things. God is following through on what he promised so long ago to Abraham and her other ancestors. 30 years before Jesus starting proclaiming that God's kingdom was at hand, long before Easter, Mary is announcing that God is keeping his promises and his reign is at last here. This is the Gospel before the Gospel! Love is coming to town! Can I get an amen?

Mary was an uneducated teen age girl, and she was an excellent theologian. The message she proclaims in the Magnificat is the Bible story—God is coming to put things right. The people on the outside, at the bottom of society's ladder-- the people like Mary—will finally get a fair shake. The boot of the oppressor—Rome, the temple system, the political rulers living off the hard work of the people—will finally be overthrown and God's justice and love will pour

down like rivers! The arrival of God's rule is always good news, especially for the poor, those who are hurt, everyone run over by the bullies.

This is not a socialist agenda or the pipe dream of a peasant girl, it is what the Bible teaches from one end to the other! Look at our Old Testament reading today from the Prophet Isaiah. It describes this same Kingdom of God. In the Message it says: "The Spirit of GOD, the Master, is on me because GOD anointed me. He sent me to preach good news to the poor, heal the heartbroken, announce freedom to all captives, pardon all prisoners." Wow—God's rule lifts up the brokenhearted and is good news, especially to the poor. Isaiah and Mary are in lock step here, aren't they? But not just them. Jesus made this upside kingdom of God's justice the heart of his preaching. The good news Jesus announced is the same good news Mary is rejoicing over. Jesus' message was always about God's kingdom arriving, and he always described that kingdom in these surprising, upside down ways, especially about bringing good news to the poor. When Jesus launched his ministry, he chose this exact passage from Isaiah to announce what his ministry was—he was anointed to proclaim good news to the poor, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom for the captives. He came to announce the year of God's favor and to comfort all who mourn.

THAT is Jesus' message. God's upside down Kingdom is arriving and it is changing everything. God is putting the world right. Friends, that is why Christmas is important. The Good News of God coming to us and putting all things right—that is something to start singing about! It's a reason to pour out into the streets and start singing and dancing and hugging strangers. We should be the people of joyful celebration—especially at Christmas.

So often people hear the church's message as about only judgment and damnation and straightening up or else. We are better known for what we are against than for what we are for. But the heart of Jesus' message, the heart of the Bible's story from beginning to end is love. The Bible story is about God's love—his self-giving action to save us. Like Mary said, God is her savior. We ALL need rescue—nobody's perfect. That's not being harsh, it's just reality. But the good news is that the savior is here. And the savior longs to help us. God never gives up. That is the Bible story in four words. God never gives up. You can't make him quit on you. He never will! God never gives up trying to welcome you and me and even that jerk down the

street. He is calling us into this upside-down kingdom where the hurt are healed, the blind are given sight, the poor are fed, and the addicts are freed at last. God's kingdom is where you are welcome and can flourish. It is where you—in spite of all the things you've done, despite what others say about you, in spite of your worst, most secret fears and wishes—it is where YOU are welcome.

There is good news for you in God's kingdom! For each of us! Mary has it right—Jesus' arrival should set us all dancing. It is something to rejoice over. Even in a year like 2020, maybe especially in a year like 2020, we have good news to experience and to share because of Christmas. Don't be defined by the world's circumstances, be transformed by what God is doing in you! Jesus is at work in you and in me like he was in Mary. He wants to use us to share the good news of His Kingdom to a world that needs it badly.

First Pres—let's be like Mary—bursting with God news, dancing the song of our Savior God! When we pray, when we worship, when we care for our family, when we reach out to our neighbor, when we face up to the fears and uncertainties of our world—let your soul rejoice! Rejoice in the God who is saving you. Rejoice in the God who gives everything to be with you. The one whose arrival is always good news—the proud are put in their place, the powerful are brought low and people's needs are met. Two thousand years ago a teenaged, unwed mother saw through all of the world's bad news and heard God's amazing Good News. And she rejoiced. May we all be as wise as Mary.

Let's pray: Lord God—thank you for saving us. Your story is an old, old story—but may you birth it fresh in us this year. Help each of us to experience your love and joy and rescue anew. Or for the first time! Lord, lead us to celebrate your love and let it spill out of us and splash all over our neighbors. And thank you for Mary. Thank you for reminding us of how you use the last, the least, and and the lost to do your will. How you even can use us. Let us trust that you will carry the good work you have begun in us on to completion. Help us be your joy filled servants!

In the strong name of Jesus we ask it, Amen!