

“Carried by Joy and Love”
Luke 1: 39-55
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One can hardly imagine a more humble, ordinary scene: two pregnant women talking in a small Judean town. And yet, in this ordinary moment a revolution is beginning that will turn the world upside down. It is a reversal of all the world’s expectations of power, justice, and salvation. And it is exactly how God works.

A savior had been promised to the world, and it was hoped that this savior would change the political and social landscape of Jerusalem; much like King David did 1000 years earlier. No one could possibly believe that two women – one old and one very young – would be the people God would choose.

Mary was a second-class citizen, deemed not worthy of conversation or consideration. She had little or no authority, virtually no rank or status in her culture.

Mary, who saw herself as a “servant of the Lord,”¹ a servant, one who was waiting upon the Lord, is who God chose to bear and deliver the savior of the world.

When Mary races over to the house of her relative Elizabeth, she discovers that her encounter with the angel was no mere fantasy. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and cries to Mary,

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”²

Elizabeth describes Mary as

“The mother of my Lord”³

Both an affirmation and confirmation of what the angel had told Mary.

¹ Luke 1: 38

² Luke 1: 42

³ Luke 1: 43

Elizabeth is a huge help to Mary, giving support, offering encouragement and sharing a sense of overflowing love and joy.

Throughout the gospel of Luke, God's love and joy emerges again and again, with the Christmas angels bringing good tidings of great joy.⁴

Jesus predicting that his followers will leap for joy.⁵ (In Luke, Ch. 2)

70 disciples returning from their mission with joy.⁶ (In Luke, Ch. 6)

Joy being felt in heaven over one sinner who repents,⁷ and (In Luke, Ch. 15)

The apostles returning to Jerusalem after the ascension, "with great joy."⁸ (In Luke, Ch. 24)

So, two themes begin to emerge: we are called out of love to **serve the Lord** and to do so with **joy**. The one follows the other.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that authentic Christian living requires a sense of service; it will inevitably — if done right — put us in situations where we are called to love and serve people, to wait on others, to minister to the needy, and to lift up the fallen.

But such a life will also bear the fruits of God's love and joy:

The joy of forgiveness, the joy of healing, and our called ministry to share God's love, a love which offers new life.

So often we forget this, especially at Christmas time, when our lives are swamped by the pressure to feel happy, happy about parties, pageants, and presents under the Christmas tree.

The **love** and **joy** that comes to us at Christmas time, when you think about it, is both simpler and more significant than **happiness**.

Happiness is linked to festivities, while **joy is tied to forgiveness**;

⁴ Luke 2: 10

⁵ Luke 6: 23

⁶ Luke 10: 17

⁷ Luke 15: 7

⁸ Luke 24: 52

Happiness is about new things, while **joy is about new life**;

Happiness comes from finding a way to keep the peace between assorted relatives after three days of Christmas togetherness, while joy comes from finding our place in the family of God.

Love and joy – It’s what Jesus came to earth to give us, and what Elizabeth helps Mary to feel as she discovers her destiny as the mother of our Lord.

Not that we should be surprised that Elizabeth is in touch with her own joy — after all, she is rejoicing in the child she herself is carrying in her womb, knowing that her child, as is every child, a gift from God.

After receiving Elizabeth’s blessing, Mary bursts into a song of praise.

“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.”⁹

God could have selected a queen or a princess or an aristocratic heiress to be the mother of the Lord, but he doesn’t.

Instead, God goes for the weary teenager trying to make her way through life the best she can.

It’s a surprising selection, but it shows God’s hand — it reveals the plan for God’s ongoing involvement in the world.

“His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation,” sings Mary.¹⁰

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”¹¹

Meg and I love to go out to eat and as I think about our most memorable dining experiences, they have always been memorable because we were served by an attentive and caring waitress or waiter.

⁹ Luke 1: 46-48

¹⁰ Luke 1: 50

¹¹ Luke 1: 51-53

A wait staff that is friendly, listens well, and doesn't rush you, can make the difference between a wonderful evening out or a real disappointment even when the food is good.

Since we both have Fridays off, our tradition is that every Thursday we go out to eat at our favorite restaurant near where we live to enjoy a leisurely dinner together. It is a special night; it's a time to relax and to catch up with each other's week. Another reason that it is so special is that all the wait staff knows us, they are so happy to see us, they greet us at the door and seat us at our favorite booth. Regardless of who is assigned to our booth they all stop by and greet us. We are served and waited on with such joy and love.

Mary says, God has "filled the hungry with good things." It's a fascinating line that suggests the image of God as "waiter," feeding those who are hungry and clearing the table of those who are already full. If you are in need, God will help you ... he'll be right with you ... but if you are self-reliant, proud, and powerful, you aren't going to receive any service from the Lord.

Jesus followed this same path as he waited on the spiritually starving people of the world. After he broke bread and shared wine with his disciples at the Last Supper, a dispute arose about which one of his followers was to be regarded as the greatest. Now Jesus knew very well that a customer is usually regarded as being greater than a waiter, but he turned these expectations on their head when he said to his disciples,

"I am among you as one who serves."¹²

I'm a servant, insists Jesus, not a customer, in effect challenging his disciples to take their place on the other side of the table.

Tom Oden, theologian and well-known author of a number of books, says that: "We lead by serving and we serve by leading."

Roy Medley, in his address to the General Board of American Baptist Churches in November 2001, noted that there is a difference between servanthood and servitude.

¹² Luke 22: 27

- Servitude is imposed; ***servanthood is embraced.***
- Servitude enslaves; ***servanthood emancipates.***
- Servitude denigrates; ***servanthood uplifts.***
- Servitude crushes; ***servanthood fulfills.***
- Servitude despairs; ***servanthood rejoices!***

And this is the key to **Christmas love and joy**. The little-known secret of Christmas is that our joy is full when we study and learn from ***Mary as servant, God as servant, Jesus as servant,*** and then become ***servants*** ourselves.

The writer of Luke reminds the readers both then and now that God comes in ways that surprise us and fill us with love and joy. The lowly and the meek are the ones who bring plenty; women are the ones to nurture a revolution; and God chooses to work in and through the most powerless among us.

Just like Mary and Elizabeth, God has also chosen to act in us. We are called to sing with Mary and Elizabeth. To sing with Joy! And as we sing we are filled with a greater power, and our ordinary lives begin to show forth and deliver His love and presence in the world.

Enya sings in her Christmas CD that was released of several years ago;

When tears are in your eyes
It's time to look inside
Your heart can find another way

Believe in what I say
Don't throw this time away
Tomorrow will be Christmas Day

So let the shadows go
And drift away like snow
Tomorrow will be Christmas Day

So dream until the night,
Becomes the morning light
Tomorrow will be Christmas Day. ¹³

Last Sunday we sang:

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

We also sang:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

We sing our songs of joy so that our love will be full and complete.

For we come together to worship God on this glorious day with a love that is full of joy. We come to sing and to pray, to listen and to see, to be renewed by the good news of God's love to us in Jesus; Jesus who is about to be born anew in our hearts and minds.

We worship today seeking God's blessing that our lives may be made confident by His Spirit so that we may joyously and lovingly share the gift of Jesus Christ with all of His children.

And the congregation responded by saying:

Amen

¹³ Song by Enya, "The Spirit of Christmas Past," from CD entitled, "And Winter Came"

Luke 1:39-55 (New International Version)

Mary Visits Elizabeth

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

Mary's Song

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers."