

Isaiah 61:1-3; 8-9 & Luke 1:39-56

Isaiah 61

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me;
God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn. ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland
instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint
spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

⁸ For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their
recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹ Their descendants shall be
known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall
acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

Luke 1:39-56 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Within a few days (of the angel Gabriel's visit) Mary set out and hurried to the hill country to
town of Judah, where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.

As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child 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 fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah
should come to me? The moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped
for joy. Blessed is she who believed that what our God said to her would be accomplished!"

Mary said:

"My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior. For you
have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will
call me blessed.

For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name. Your mercy
reaches from age to age for those who fear you. You have shown strength with your arm; you
have scattered the proud in their conceit; you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and
raised the lowly to high places. You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have
sent the rich away empty. You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your
mercy – the promise you made to our ancestors – to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants
forever."

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then returned home.

In our final week before Christmas, we finally get to some of the birth story – our main scripture is what has come to be known as ‘Mary’s Song’ or the *Magnificat* – her beautiful words of a prophet, forecasting who this child will be, a song of joy that comes from deep within.

I shared during ‘Joys & Concerns’ last week that at Corpus Christi House¹ we have a growing number of people sleeping outside at night and that this is causing some problems and anxiety for us. It makes our neighbors very upset, it makes city officials and police upset, it leaves a mess each day, we worry about people when it is so cold at night, and every morning there are a few folks who will not get their stuff cleaned-up and moved. We have spent many hours worrying about and discussing this problem over the past months – about systems of injustice versus personal responsibility; about if people are the problem or poverty is the problem. And every time it feels like we have had enough and are about to move in the direction of saying, we have to tell these folks they got to go – it is just too hard to deal with – every time, there is a voice on our board who reminds us, “whatever our decision is, it should not be made based on what is easiest for us – we need to think about the good of our people, not what is easiest and cleanest for us.” This does not give us our answer, but it is an important thing we must remember, that we can’t just decide based on what is easiest for us.

¹ Boise’s Homeless Day Shelter

When I read the story of Mary, I thought of this assertion – that Mary certainly did not make her decision based on what was easiest for her – she made her decision based on an openness to the impossible ways of God. Thanks be to God for that.

Apparently Martin Luther, the Father of the Reformation, wrote a commentary on the *Magnificat* – along with it, he SENT A LETTER TO PRINCE JOHN FREDERICK, DUKE OF SAXONY, introducing his commentary. Luther said that it is an excellent custom to sing the *Magnificat* at evening prayers each night. Further, he told this Prince and Duke, that the *Magnificat* "ought to be learned and kept in mind by all who would rule well and be helpful lords."

Each time we read or sing the *Magnificat*, we proclaim to each other what sort of God we believe in, as Luther says, how God deals with those of low and high societal degree. Luther concludes his letter, saying we sing it for three reasons: (1) to strengthen our faith; (2) to comfort the lowly; and (3) to terrify the mighty. "The mightier you are," thought Luther, "the more you must fear".²

Here in *Luke*'s story we have an encounter of two women, we catch a glimpse of the liberating actions of God in Jesus Christ – that part of their specific experience is God's preparation for mending all of creation. Elizabeth is no longer able to bear children, and Mary is not yet properly married. They could not be more different, even though *Luke* tells us they are relatives. Elizabeth

² Bonnie Jensen, "We Sing Mary's Song," in *Word & World*.

is the wife of a priest and part of the establishment. Mary is a simple country girl. Elizabeth has a long past and the scars inflicted by years of struggling with the pain of infertility. Mary is at the beginning of her life. People might have spoken of Elizabeth as "no longer a woman" and of Mary as "not yet a woman." And yet, bringing these two women together seems to be part of God's preparation. "Nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37). In accepting the impossible possibilities (I am too old; I am not even married) these women, together with their children, John the Baptist and Jesus, become the beginning of a New Age. The solidarity of these two women makes possible their impossible situation.³ Both have become outcasts by their strange condition, and in finding each other they discover deep joy.

We have a bit of a joy shortage it feels like – the increasing comforts we have as a society don't seem to be bringing us joy at a corresponding rate. Joy seems almost irreverent in a world where so much is going wrong: who can be joyful when, five years after Sandy Hook, our gun violence seems to only have increased; who can be authentically joyful amidst the greatest refugee crisis since World War II; who can smile with joy as the rich get richer and poor more destitute? It's hard to get jump-up-and-down joyful about any of that. Only, says Barbara Brown Taylor, joy has never had very much to do with what is going on in the world at the time. That is what makes it different from happiness, or pleasure, or fun. All of those depend on positive conditions—good health, good job, happy family, lots of toys. The only condition for joy is the presence of God.⁴ Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a

³ Letty Russell, "God's Great Reversal," in *The Christian Century*, 1991.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy," *The Living Pulpit*

depressed economy, in the middle of a war, inside a homeless shelter, or in the waiting room of the intensive care unit.

Joy and Pain, perhaps in the life of faith, joy and pain are not opposites or antonyms, but rather companions for those who seek to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. As we seek to follow our vocation, as we seek to love openly, as we seek to go where the God of love is inviting us – we are invited to share in a life of joy and pain.

Just a few weeks ago a woman walked into Corpus Christi House to drop off some sandwiches and hygiene items – it was a crowded day, as most winter days are – and as she walked out I saw the pain in her eyes as tears streamed down her face. As she followed the nudging of the spirit to do a good deed, she also came face-to-face with the painful reality of homelessness. And her pain and unsettledness retuned those feeling to me, reminding me that this is not a scene I should be adjusted to – and on my way to my office here that morning, I had to pull over, as her tears brought tears to me that had not been cried in many years. Joy and pain – the companions of seeking to serve.

In the early 1990s there was a song released which asks the question of Mary that I always find myself asking when I read these birth stories, “Mary did you know?” The song asks, “Mary did you know that your baby boy was going to go on to do such amazing things: to walk on water, to heal a blind man, to save our sons and daughters – did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?”

Those are the joys, but what the song is missing is the companion: Mary did you know your baby boy would one day say, “my mother and brothers are all those who hear God’s words and obey.” Mary, did you know that your son would be betrayed, arrested, and tortured? Mary did you know that you would have to watch your son be ridiculed, rejected, and executed? These are the questions that I always wonder as I read these stories of Mary: of her accepting God’s calling on her life; as she sings for joy to God her savior. Mary, did you know your vocation would be to birth both greatest joy and greatest pain?

You don’t get a more clear calling in life than the visit of an angel named “Man of God”⁵, and you don’t get more assurance of this calling than the signs that a child is growing within you. And yet, the assurance of her calling is in no way an *inoculation* from pain or doubt or fear. In fact, I think we can be assured that if we follow the leading of the God of love, we will experience our portion of pain – if we are willing to go where God calls us, to see a bit how God sees, to open ourselves to a bit of the world’s suffering – if we are willing to love people without asking “what is easiest for us” – ours will be a life of the companions joy and pain.

Since her death twenty years ago, the depths of the pain and darkness that Mother Teresa felt have become increasingly know to the wider world. The unsuspected cost of her mission was that she herself would live in what she called, “terrible darkness.” To one of her Spiritual Directors she wrote, “Now Father – since 1949 or 1950 (I’ve had) this terrible sense of loss – this untold darkness – this loneliness – this continual longing for God – which gives me that pain

⁵ The meaning the angel Gabriel’s name

deep down in my heart. Darkness is such that I really do not see – neither with my mind nor with my reason. The place of God in my soul is blank.”

This revelation is surprising to many of us, for those of us who long for a clearer sense of vocation or direction – we often think that having such a clear sense of purpose, as Mother Teresa had, would create a greater sense of inner peace and calm. At least, this is how I feel, as I idealize those who have given their whole lives in loving and humble service to God – those who seem to know exactly what they are to be doing with their precious gift of life. That is why it is important to know some of the human sides of our heroes and idols – it reminds us that they did not actually live free of fear and pain and anxiety, but are a bit more like us.

Earlier in her life, Mother Teresa had experienced a high degree of union with God, describing intimate conversations she had with Christ. This made this change later in life all the more surprising and agonizing – feeling more the abandonment of God. It was not that she doubted her mission. It was on a train ride where she experienced a decisive mystical encounter with Christ, a certain call, “to give up all and follow Him into the slums – to serve in the poorest of the poor.” Of which she says, “I knew it was God’s will and that I had to follow.”⁶

Her writings tell us that for “ten years, except for the interlude of a month, the darkness did not weaken its grip on her soul. And her writings also tell us that she was aware that it was love that made her suffering so acute. “Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? The child of Your love... To whom can I cling – no, No One... The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable.”

⁶ Mother Teresa, *Come be my Light: the Private Writings of the ‘Saint of Calcutta.’* Doubleday: New York. 2007.

Despite this, those who served alongside her talk of her radiant smile – they say she carried out her responsibilities with vigor, joy, and enthusiasm.

In her following the call of God, the companions of joy and pain; in opening ourselves to the work of the God of love, joy and pain.

Again: The only condition for joy is the presence of God. This is why some of the most joyful people we know are some of those who have experienced some of life's most difficult realities – this is one of the things our Christian sisters and brothers in the southern hemisphere have to teach us who live in the wealthiest nations.

And so, *Mary, did you know?* I think Mary did know. Not all the details – not exactly how it would go for her and her son. But as we look at her response, as we read the words of her song – that the mighty will be taken from their thrones and the lowly raised to high places; that the hungry are filled with good things, while the rich are sent away empty – I think she knew that these things did not come with only ease and laughter. I think Mary knew full well that no prophet is welcomed with open arms – certainly not in their hometown; I think Mary knew that the smuggling the love of God inside her body was not going to be a pain-free; I think Mary knew that she was saying 'yes' to a life of great joy and great pain. I think she knew she was saying yes to the work of love. She did not ask, "what is easiest for me", if she had, the answer would certainly have been, "No, let it be with someone else according to your word."

Fortunately for us, she possessed great joy.

She did not have a sonogram, or a husband, or an affidavit from the Holy Spirit that said, “The child really is mine. Now leave the poor girl alone.” All she had was her persistent willingness to believe that the God who had called her would be part of whatever happens next – and that, apparently, was enough to make her burst into song.⁷

And so, let us in these words, keep announcing to one another the sort of God in which we believe – reminding ourselves that we are called by the God of Love, which means a life filled with pain and sustaining joy. As our song of response, we will be singing Mary’s words together⁸, in doing so, may they (1) strengthen our faith; (2) comfort the lowly; and (3) terrify the mighty. May they have their way with us. Amen.

⁷From Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon, “Singing Ahead of Time” in *Home by Another Way*

⁸ We sang together from Sing the Journey, No. 13, *My soul is proclaims with wonder*