

"Joining Joy"
Advent 3: Joy
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Isaiah 35:1-10
Luke 1:39-56

The longest night of the year is creeping towards us. This coming Saturday, the sun will give us its last rays of light at 4:31 pm. Sleep well, my darlings, because the sun's rays will not wake you until 7:17 am the next morning. This is the time when the darkness hovers like a cold and damp blanket, not really offering warmth or comfort.

Although the seasons of light and darkness were not the same where Mary lived, she lived among her own shadows. Young, not yet married, she had said "yes" to God's plan to bear the world a savior. But there were the practical matters: she was young, and not yet married. In Luke's version we read today, we do not know yet what Joseph knew, and if he had yet agreed to stand by Mary, to love and protect her in the patriarchal world of their time. And we do not know what Mary knew: the angel told her that of this child's kingdom, there would be no end. But did Mary know that this king would be brutalized and hanged from a tree? It is hard for me to imagine what it would have been like to be Mary, though for some it might be easier than others. I got a message yesterday from a mom; she belongs to the church I pastored in Montclair as my first call, almost 15 years ago. Her son had been in my youth group: a kind, curious, thoughtful and playful kid. Yesterday, his mom let me know that her beautiful son had died of cancer that morning at 29 years old. I am terribly sad for this mom.

And yet, this is the day we light an Advent candle that is colored rose. Standing out among the deep purple of the other 3 candles, this candle blushes like first love, or like the pink of the sky right before the dawn. The candle stands for joy. And so we look, and we wait, and we wonder: when will joy be upon us? How can we join joy?

Maybe to be able to fully join joy, we have to be able to go through all the other feelings that visit us. They knock on our door, but we don't let them in. How will we greet grief? Pain? Loneliness? Injustice?

I suspect that those who feel the most despair around the holidays feel the dissonance between what the manufactured cheer of the holiday expects of us, and what we really

feel. It's not that these feelings don't impact us; in fact, in this time especially, many of us absorb anxiety like a dry and thirsty sponge. Bitterness can be like one of those trick birthday candles-- you can blow it out, but a few seconds later it sparks again and turns to flame. This happens again and again, unless you douse it with water. And then, we feel shame because we do not feel the joy we are supposed to feel.

So maybe instead of stuffing it, we can be a little more honest this holiday. Jesus can take it. Letting out those messier feelings before the divine may allow us then to make room for the baby to be born, and for us to help receive him with joy.

It's like cleaning the dishes before you start baking a cake. Sure, you could start a fancy recipe with the sink full of dishes. Believe me, I have tried! But, I find that I inevitably need one mixing bowl at the bottom of the dish pile. And when I try to wash it so I can use it to mix my cake, I can't fit the whole thing over that stack of plates. So I move the faucet to the side, which of course leads to some splattering of water. The time and effort it takes to move around those dirty dishes I had been avoiding ends up being more than if I had just stopped to clean, dry, and put away each dish before getting started with my recipe.

Everyone knows that it makes more sense to clean the dishes before we start cooking something new. But even though we know this, we try to put on hope, peace, and joy without doing the work to attend to the anxiety, the conflict, and the despair we have. This does not mean we should never attempt joy until each and every negative feeling is cleansed from our lives. But acknowledging what else is lurking and perhaps blocking the way to joy, and giving it space to breathe, might allow us to have a more pure and less entangled experience of joy.

Most of you don't know that over Thanksgiving, my sister and I and our spouses and children had an important, holy, and painful task. Ever since my mom had died 6 years ago, her ashes had been on a high shelf in my sister's closet. It's somewhat appropriate, since our mom really liked fashion, and my sister has lots and lots of clothes. But for me, there was a feeling of being stuck, like my grief could never be made complete. And though my sister liked having our mom's ashes nearby, her family had moved to a new house, which my mom never visited. It didn't seem right to stick her ashes in a new and unfamiliar closet. And so, we planned a service of interment of ashes in the garden of a beautiful, historic cemetery. As the expert in these types of things, I began the work of writing a liturgy for this service. Though I have done this multiple times in the course of serving 3 churches as pastor, everytime I sat down to write *this* liturgy, I just couldn't do it. Someone told me to let myself be the daughter, not

the pastor. This was really good advice. So, I asked my friend and former co-pastor Marylen to write the liturgy for us. She crafted something beautiful and personal and faithful. Our faces were clouded with tears while we read those words over mom's grave, and scooped our hands into her ashes to place them, lovingly, into the earth. But let me tell you it was also a joyful day. We took some time afterwards to walk around the cemetery. We have a picture of our children-- my mom's grandchildren-- sitting on a bench swing by the pond next to mom's grave. The light is hitting their faces in a way that makes them look golden. And though their faces had been stained with tears an hour before, in that moment on the swing, their faces reflected the joy I think we all felt.

Joy grows when we can attend to the other things we might be feeling. But **joy also expands when we attend to one another.** What my friend and colleague Marylen did for me in writing mom's burial liturgy was similar to what Elizabeth gave to Mary. But my friend did not know what I needed until I told her. It takes some vulnerability to ask another for something we need. For Mary, perhaps she needed a safe place to live, away from the prying and judging eyes of her neighbors while her belly expanded. But I also think she needed a co-conspirator, someone to dream and scheme with.

Mary and Elizabeth dreamed and schemed a better world together, and they knew they each carried something, someone, who would help usher it forth. Isn't that one of the roles of the church as well? We help each other see that God has placed something in you, in me, that is going to help usher forth the world God wants to share with us.

Something very special happens in our Sunday morning adult bible study class, as I understand it. I'm not sure exactly what it is, because I never go. But whenever I pass by the Tower Room between 9:30-10:30 am, I see animated expression. I see laughter. I see newcomers and long-time members, young and old alike. While I would love to be a fly on the wall in this Bible Study, I think that actually showing up for it might destroy the magic. Or, maybe I should say, holiness. Because when I walk into the room, I bring not only myself, but everything associated with the role of clergy. That's mostly good stuff, I think. However, it can also be a crutch. Instead of each lay person in the room becoming a theologian, I become the resident expert on all things holy. That's not to say there's no role for me to teach Bible, which I love doing and which I actually do offer each Wednesday morning. And I love offering thoughtful guidance that helps shape the narrative of who we are and who God calls us to become. But sometimes, to be the priesthood of *all* believers, it is good and appropriate for me as professional clergy to be silent and leave those whom the Holy Spirit has summoned as everyday Christians to dream and scheme what God might be telling them, just as Mary and Elizabeth did. You will notice that Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah-- who was a priest--

was struck speechless when he questioned his wife's miraculous conception. God made Zechariah stop, be silent, and trust the women to bring forth what was happening.

And let us take a moment to magnify what was indeed happening. Mary sang of powerful things. In her interpretation of this song, preacher Amy Butler writes, "The power of God is revealed among those who labor for justice. They humble the arrogant. They turn unjust thrones to dust. Their Wisdom is revealed in the lives and truths of those on the margins. God is a feast for the hungry."

The point is not to make the rich and powerful despair. There is no talk of a violent overthrow. But for the wealthy, for the privileged, for the connected to have a glimpse of what emptiness feels like, what hunger tastes like, and what invisibility looks like, offers them empathy for the most vulnerable in their communities. Ultimately, the hope is that those with and those without can share at the same feast at God's table of abundance. Our joy is only made complete when it is a joy that the suffering may take part in, too. The meaning of Christmas is lost if we fail to magnify these things.

"My soul magnifies the Lord." These are the words Mary uses to begin her song. A task for us as we seek to join joy is to *magnify*. We can magnify bitterness. We can magnify anxiety-- I find that very easy to magnify. But what if we were to magnify justice? What if we were to magnify light? As children did any of you ever hold a magnifying glass over a dead leaf, and let the sun shine through it? The magnified light can burn a hole right through the leaf! So imagine if we tried that same experiment, but instead of holding the magnifying glass over a leaf, we held it over the problem of hunger, and the fact that a new rule proposed to take effect next year will take away food stamps from 700,000 hungry people?

What we choose to magnify is an act of power. One day last week, I was feeling low. I was feeling stress and anxiety about some conversations I had had earlier in the day. I had to pick my daughter up from Tae Kwon Do practice. It was already dark, and my mind was going on overload about how I still had to walk the dog, cook dinner, and get a little housework done. To be frank, I wasn't looking forward to it. But then I looked at my child's hopeful face as she asked me "what are we going to do tonight, Mama?" Instead of projecting onto her the dreariness I was feeling, I chose to magnify joy. I took off my shoes and gave her a playful shove onto the mat-- and she expertly swung a roundhouse kick back at me. To her delight, we continued to spar on the mat for a few minutes. For the rest of the night, my daughter and I both felt joy.

Theologian Henri Nouwen wrote that “Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away.” Magnify this: what God is doing through Mary, through Elizabeth, through Jesus, through you and through me has the power to change us, and to change the world. Believe, and join in the joy. Amen.