

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Luke 1:47-55

Third Sunday of Advent, Year B
Midway Presbyterian Church
December 17, 2017

Mary's Song of Praise

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson today from Isaiah we hear a prophet who has been anointed by the Spirit of God to bring good news. There will be a reversal of fate to those in various states of deprivation. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus will quote from this text in Luke 4 when he stood up in the synagogue on the Sabbath, took the scroll and read. He then sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (4:21b) Listen to these words from Isaiah 61:1-4 and 8-11...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today from Luke we hear "The Magnificat," Mary's song of praise to God, who remembers the poor and lonely and delivers them from the proud and oppressive. Her words anticipate her child's own words of care for the least of our brothers and sisters. Listen to these words from Luke 1:47-55...

Sermon

In the intensive care waiting room a week before Christmas the rules are unchanged: family members are allowed to visit for fifteen minutes every two hours. This routine has gone on for two weeks and Beth is exhausted. Her husband is in the final stages of lung cancer.

Another woman in the waiting room is there with her two sons. Maria's husband suffered a heart attack and is in critical condition. She holds her boys close to her as they wait for the next opportunity to visit. From the look on their faces it is clear they are afraid. From the look of their clothes it is also clear they are poor.

After the noon visitation the two families are back in the waiting room. Beth takes out her cell phone and calls a pizza place. In a short while the room is filled with the smells of cheese and pepperoni.

Beth says, “I made a mistake and ordered way too much pizza. Would you all have lunch with us?”

Maria replies gently, “Thank you.”

They tell their stories and smile for the first time in a long time. Joy in the midst of hardship.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, the penitential purple of the Advent candles changes to pink or rose, and we celebrate “Gaudete” (gaw DAY tay)—“Rejoice Sunday.” Mary’s candle reminds us not only of her ladyship, but also of her joy and her praise of God.

“Shout for joy, daughter of Zion,” said the prophet Zephaniah. “Draw water joyfully from the wells of salvation,” said the prophet Isaiah. “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy,” said the angel to the shepherds. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” said the Apostle Paul.

The capacity for joy in the midst of hardship is a gift from God. But this kind of joy is deeper than happiness. Happiness is tied to circumstances. Joy has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with God’s grace.

Someone said, “Happiness is what you feel when you think you have got everything you want. That is why nobody is completely happy.” We either do not get what we want, or we get it and find out it does not deliver the happiness we sought. Joy is a different experience. Joy is what we feel when we discover we already have what we need most.

We all can recall Christmases past, when things were simpler and life less hectic. But if we want to truly remember a simple Christmas, we need to go all the way back to the story told by Luke chapter 1. A humble young girl named Mary rejoices with Elizabeth over the news she received that her womb bears a gift from God. God is giving her a son who will be the Son of the Most High, the one who will inherit the throne of David. Mary knows that she has no social, political, or economic standing. But she also knows that this child is not just a gift *to her*, but a gift *to all like her*. A priceless gift—a Savior for all.

It would have been one thing for Elizabeth to sing like Hannah of old. For old and barren Elizabeth and Zechariah were given John. But when Mary sings, it must be said that God’s grace is not as of old, but new, and strange, and beyond understanding. This child will not be as Isaac or Samson or Samuel, for this child will be the Son of God.

Mary’s song begins with joy and praise that God has favored a handmaiden of low estate. Reflecting her trust in God, she sings of God’s promise *as if* God has already done these things, (he has filled the hungry with good things). But only briefly does she speak of herself. This is not about Mary. This is about God and salvation for humankind. Mary sees God’s grace and goodness toward her as but a single instance of the way of God in the world. God cares for the poor and the oppressed and the hungry, those in need, and those in sorrow.

God has exalted those of low degree;
He has filled the hungry with good things.

Mary’s Song of Praise helps us remember what Christmas is truly about. About God meeting us in our need. The *gift* of Christ—“for God so loved the world.”

It has been said that central to worship is praise. The writer of Hebrews implores his readers to “continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God...” (3:15a) Mary is a good example

of such praise. And Mary's song has in common with Christmas reminiscences of simpler times a message of surprising joy, discovered in the midst of fear and wonder about what has happened to her.

We live in 2017, and we cannot return to simpler times. SUV's won't be traded in for horse-drawn sleighs. But we *can* celebrate a Christmas that reflects the simple beauty and grace of that first one some 2000 years ago. We don't have to return to handmade gifts, or recipes of past feasts; though those practices might be fun and meaningful. But we can focus our attention on sacred truths revealed long ago.

How? Well, by remembering that God cares for those in need, those facing fear and hardship, and those who are in sorrow. We can reflect on the good news of great joy that came first to a poor girl from the country and to poor shepherds out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. In the midst of food, festivity, and presents, let us remind ourselves that no matter how rich or poor, how young or old, how healthy or sick, the greatest need we have is for a relationship with the One who created us, loves us, and redeems us through his Son.

But God calls us not only to know his blessing, God also calls us to be a blessing to others. Think of ways to be generous and gracious toward others in need. Ways to help them experience joy in the midst of hardship. There are only eight days left, but you still have time to send a Christmas card to someone who is lonely or sick and whose day would be brightened knowing that you thought of them during a busy Christmas and cared enough to let them know. You still have time to visit someone in the nursing home or the hospital. You still have time to make a phone call. We all have time to plan to contribute to the Christmas Joy Offering to bring joy to servants of the church in a time of need, and future leaders in their education.

In his book Days of Grace, tennis great Arthur Ashe tells of how his father had a wonderful way of helping his children remember what Christmas is all about. After they unwrapped all their presents, they had to choose one toy to give away. They had to take one of their brand-new toys, go to the Salvation Army, and ask that their toy be given to a child who had no gifts to open that day.

With this frame of mind, we can look forward to moving into a new year with a new sense of purpose. Praising God for the gift of a Savior. Sharing the good news of Jesus to people in this community and throughout the world. Reflecting God's love and care for the least of our brothers and sisters.

For those who are facing Christmas for the first time or the tenth time since a loved one has died, almost everything reminds us of the one whose stocking is not hanging from the mantle. Some things can be magnified at Christmas, like our sorrow about the ways in which our lives are not what we wish, or our shortcomings as families, or health concerns. Some things are not as easy as they once were. It is when we accept that life is hard and will not provide everything we hope for, that we can ponder where we will find joy in the midst of hardship.

Yes, joy can still be present when life is difficult. For Christ comes to grieving people with broken homes and broken hearts. Christmas is the promise that God cares for children who hunger for love and security, the lonely who hunger for friendship, and all who hunger for peace. God comes to be with us in our darkest valleys, to lead us through them, and to carry us when we can't make it on our own. No matter how dark it seems, there is still the light of Christ. No matter how hurt we are, there can be peace and comfort. No matter how abandoned we feel, there is a Presence. If God's joy could be present in the birth of a fearful peasant's child when

there was no room in the inn, then there is no place or time so difficult, but that God's joy cannot be present there also.

On Friday, a divorced mother awakens her teenage son for school and he immediately starts complaining about everything she tries to do for him. She wonders if he loves her. She does not know what to do. Her job is only that—a job. She is working more hours and getting less done. She feels older than her years. Beyond all that, she is worried about her own mother. For now, her mom can still care for herself, but in a few more years she knows some hard decisions will be required.

Well, on the way home from work that day she turns on the radio. The first station is playing “Winter Wonderland.” That’s way too cheerful. The second station is playing a song with dogs barking out “Jingle Bells.” She turns off the radio. She used to love December, it was her favorite time of the year—a magical time, but this year she just feels tired, worn out, wondering if there is any hope or joy to be found.

On Sunday she goes to church, though she is not sure she wants to, and there she begins to sing with others in the congregation. The hymns are not about a holly jolly Christmas. They’re about a joy that comes on a “Silent Night.” Of “Angels from the Realms of Glory” proclaiming Christ’s birth to poor shepherds out on a cold night. The choir sings about a child born in a stable, laid in a manger, with animals present. Of “hopes and fears of all the years, met in thee tonight.” And this tired and broken woman slowly begins to know that Christmas is not about happiness, but about a joy that is deeper than all our troubles—a peace beyond understanding.

Praise the Lord!
Praise, O servants of the Lord;
praise the name of the Lord. (Ps. 113:1)