

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d’Alene
Third Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 10, 2023
10am

Text: Luke 1:46-55

Theme: Those who dream...sow joy (Joy)

[prayer]

When I was a young child and it was time to put on the annual Christmas pageant, the coveted role by most of the girls in my Sunday School class was Mary. Getting picked for the part meant you got to wear a beautiful blue veil and hold a pretend baby – not a bad gig for an eight-year-old who liked to play dress-up and dolls. There were also very few lines to memorize, so if you were feeling nervous, it was the ideal role.

In hindsight it now strikes me as odd that Christmas pageant Mary is mostly silent. Because in Scripture she is very much *not* silent. But most Christmas pageants leave out The Magnificat – Mary’s Song.

Like our girls today, I once danced to “Mary Did You Know?” Songwriter Mark Lowry wrote the lyrics in 1991. He wanted to “put into words the unfathomable.”¹ He imagined himself as an angel at the manger, watching Mary bend tenderly over her newborn son. The phrase “Mary did you know” is meant to express the angel’s joy at the divine mystery of the Incarnation.² How wonderful and how strange that the Word should become flesh and make his dwelling among us (John 1:14)!

The song has remained popular precisely because of that sense of wonder. But it’s also been criticized because it does the same thing so many Christmas pageants do: It silences Mary. A popular internet parody of the song entitled “Mary Freaking Knew” pokes fun at Lowry’s lyrics, reminding people Luke 1

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Did_You_Know%3F

² <https://religionnews.com/2021/12/17/mary-did-you-know-songwriter-mark-lowry-remains-grateful-despite-controversy-mainsplain-theology-pentatonix-christmas/>

demonstrates that Mary knew a great deal.³ After all, she grew up within the Jewish messianic tradition, which taught that one day a Messiah would liberate Israel from foreign oppression and restore the throne of David. Isaiah and other Hebrew prophets long foretold a great social reversal where the poor would be uplifted and the powerful brought low. “The Lord God’s spirit is upon me...to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release of captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Isa 61:1-2 CEB). This was good news to a peasant girl living under Roman occupation. Perhaps we leave The Magnificat out of Christmas pageants because it’s not a demure Christmas carol; it’s a moral, political, and economic manifesto sung from the margins of ancient Palestine. And if our lives bear more resemblance to the lives of the self-satisfied than the lives of people like Mary, the Magnificat should give us serious pause.

So yes, Mary knew. But even so, the wonder remained. How could *this* child, conceived out of wedlock, really be the Messiah? How could something with such humble and impeachable origins accomplish Israel’s deliverance? This was not what she or the prophets had imagined. So often God’s dreams for us are different than what we think they should be. When this happens the spiritual question then becomes: Can we still find joy in the unexpected?

[pause]

I have a little cross-stitch sign on my office door that says, “Who plants a seed beneath the sod and waits to see believes in God.” Seed-planting – whether garden seeds or the seeds of dreams – is a risky venture. We sow in the dark unknown and trust that we will reap something worthwhile in the future. That trust leaves us vulnerable to disappointment. Mary could have been disappointed at the way God chose to sow Israel’s dream of a Messiah. It was absolutely not what she or anyone else expected. That incredulity followed Jesus his entire life. A Messiah with questionable origins, a Messiah who preached peace and not war, a Messiah hung on a cross – it just didn’t fit the narrative people imagined.

Mary could have shared their disappointment and disbelief. Instead, she humbly chose to believe what God promised her. And that belief became the basis for her joy. Happiness is a fleeting emotion that depends on circumstance, but joy has

³ <https://twitter.com/McMannKrtaylor3/status/1469839789805342728?s=20>

deep roots. Joy is born from the discipline of faith. We sow joy when we surrender to and trust God's vision for our lives. Mary could rejoice because she trusted God to fulfill His promises to her and her people. The way that God chose to do that was incomprehensible to the rich and powerful. This is why Jesus taught that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God (Matt 19:24). It's not that it's impossible. It's just that power and privilege are not the currency of God's kingdom. The moment God chose Mary to bear the Messiah, God demonstrated His solidarity with the poor and outcast. It was scandalous. It still is – God's scandalous grace choosing to dwell in the scandalous body of an unwed teenage mother.

But the Magnificat, like the prophetic songs before it, makes clear that God's kingdom is an upside-down kingdom. In God's kingdom the world's values are reversed. Instead of enthroning the rich and powerful, God enthrones the poor, the weak, and the hungry. God shows favor to the humble while humbling the proud. God denounces political and economic systems that perpetuate hurt and disadvantage. And God's mercy is for everyone, even the people who anger God and offend His holiness and compassion. Jesus's ministry fulfilled this great reversal – a Messiah who broke bread with tax collectors, healed the outcast, and died for sinners. If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we must share in the scandalous grace of his upside-down kingdom by accepting, loving, serving, and nurturing the people our world disdains.

[pause]

In the gospels, a disciple is someone who recognizes and confesses Jesus as Savior. Mary is the first to do this in Luke's gospel. The Magnificat is her proclamation of salvation. God is her Savior precisely because of her lowliness (misery in the Hebrew) and how God has acted in history on behalf of the *anawim* – the poor who suffer in body *and* spirit. Notice that she sings her song in the past tense. God has already *scattered* the proud. God has *pulled* the powerful down from their thrones and *lifted* the poor. God has *fed* the hungry and *sent away* the rich. Mary sings of Jesus' approaching mission as if it has already been accomplished. It's remarkable! Where does this remarkable faith come from?

Mary knew because Mary remembered. She remembered what God had done for her people in the past. And because she remembered, she could rejoice with

confidence in the future she now carried in her womb. God had proven God's faithfulness in the past, and now God would prove it again. God was once more stepping down from heaven.

This is the gift of faith. We remember God's past mercies toward us. And in our remembering we find the confidence to joyfully sing about the future as if God's promises have already come to pass. The Magnificat proclaims the pattern of God's justice and mercy throughout history. Even on the days when it feels like the world is too broken to be redeemed, Mary teaches us that we can trust this pattern and rejoice. Joy is our response to God's faithfulness. And God's faithfulness is the antidote to despair.

Walter Brueggemann writes, "The church meets to imagine what our lives can be like if the gospel were true." We are not called to be realists; we are called to be prophets, proclaiming the reign of God. A disciple of Jesus knows that God's reign is already as good as accomplished. It was accomplished on the cross and at the resurrection. The seeds of that reign have already been sown. So go ahead and rejoice! If we are faithful to the Gospel, we will reap at harvesttime because God keeps His promises. Our task is to cultivate the ability to see the world through the eyes of faith so we can perceive the mighty acts of God and magnify our Savior.

Let us pray.

Great Creator,
We are in awe of you.
We will never know how you managed to dream up
Mountains and valleys,
Freckles, dimples, and curly hair,
A cool morning mist,
The change of seasons,
Or the magic of music.
Your greatness is beyond our reckoning.
And because we are in awe of you,
We believe we must follow Mary's lead
And allow our souls to sing.
We believe that the appropriate reaction to your goodness
Is complete gratitude,

Which looks like love for our neighbor,
Justice for the poor,
Food for the hungry,
And joy that overflows.
And even though we do not always believe in ourselves,
We believe that our song is pleasing to you.
We believe. Help our unbelief.
In Christ's name we pray, amen.⁴

⁴ Prayer by Rev. Sarah Are Speed | A Sanctified Art, LLC | sanctifiedart.org