

“Joy for the World!”
Rev. Mary Cunningham Gause
Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2020

Luke 1:39-45

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”



Sermon: “Joy for the World!”

I love Christmas lights. I love white lights and colored lights, twinkling lights and icicle lights. I love luminaries and rope lights. And I love Christmas trees! I love the carefully and artfully decorated trees with matching ribbons and carefully placed matching ornaments and I love the trees full of handmade ornaments that serve as almost a memory tree of children and grandchildren. I love the greenery that lines Advent wreaths, and garlands that flank doorways and fences. I love Christmas treats of all kinds and find it hard to say no to almost any Christmas cookie. I love just about everything about the Christmas season but my absolute favorite part of Christmas is the music!

One of my greatest pleasures on the day after Thanksgiving is to refresh my Christmas favorites playlist. Harry and I love to belt our “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” along with the Jackson 5 while on the way to school; my Spotify music station is programmed with “Christmas tunes” from all over; Bill’s car plays Gene Autrey and Rosemary Clooney’s Christmas album on repeat, and even our teenage son has added Paul McCartney’s Wonderful Christmastime to his playlist.

I’m not sure about you, but Christmas music has the ability to change my demeanor. My frustrating encounters with ignorant drivers can be significantly diminished with a few rounds of “All I want for Christmas is You.” Cooking dinner is always merrier with Stevie Wonder’s “One Little Christmas Tree” playing. And it is not an accident that our stores and businesses pump Christmas tunes into their establishments and onto their recorded waiting times as it is harder to be frustrated while whistling “Jingle Bell Rock.”

Our Christmas music is not limited to only secular tunes. It is not unusual to hear “Silent Night,” “Joy to the World” and “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” blasting from the store loudspeakers or over the contemporary station. That line between secular and religious music is quite blurred this time of year. But in the church, the line is fairly defined, especially during this time of year that centers on such a significant act.

During this season of Advent and Christmas, our hymns play a significant role in our worship. “Silent Night,” “O Come All Ye Faithful,” “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus,” “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” and so many other Advent/Christmas hymns we sing tell the story of Christ’s birth from the pregnancy of Mary through the very night Jesus was born. When we sing “Away in a Manger,” we hear again the story of Jesus born in a stable next to the sheep and cows and goats. When we sing “Silent Night,” we reflect upon the quiet, almost mundane, night and envision the mother Mary holding her child and reflect upon the power of love that that child embodies. And, when we sing “Joy to the World,” we remember the angels’ words to the shepherds as they broke into the still, silent night and sang boldly and dramatically of God’s incredible inbreaking into our world and the Joy that all may know because of it. All these hymns and the other 65 in our hymnal remind us of the story of God and God’s love for humanity and convey through the power of music God’s connection to us. All through this Advent season we sing hymns of our faith as we reflect upon the themes of hope and peace and joy and love. All four so intricately entwined into the music of the season.

On this third Sunday of Advent – we light the candle for joy and sing the words of the familiar hymn “Joy to the World.”

It is odd to think about joy this year. This year has been hard. It has been unpredictable. It has been one of those one step forward and two steps back years when almost any forward momentum is met by roadblocks – all with the reality of the Coronavirus and our nation and world’s responses at its root. We have moved school online and are asking all those with families to perform their jobs while balancing the rigors of online learning. We are asking teachers to learn a whole new method of teaching and in ways that are not very conducive to learning. And we are expecting all of those in leadership to know the right answers when they, too, are just doing the best they can. The medical community is tired and weary and struggling with no end in sight. Businesses are either barely hanging on or having to close and put dedicated employees out of a paycheck. We have postponed and cancelled birthday celebrations, anniversaries, weddings, and

graduations. We have been asked to forego celebrations with our larger families for Thanksgiving and are looking the same at Christmas. We have moved worship online and while there are gifts in being able to worship via the internet, it has been a struggle especially as we move into Advent and Christmas. We are longing for hugs and interaction and face to face conversation. We are tired and frustrated and feeling hopeless even with a vaccine breaking onto the horizon. There certainly does not seem to be a lot of joy to find in this year.

But I think we often equate joy with happiness and while you can be happy and have joy, they are actually two different concepts.

Happiness is often self-made. It is often your creation due to hard work or sometimes even luck. There are many things that can bring happiness – a happy family or marriage, happy job, or happy life. We often work hard for these things and thus deserve to celebrate those accomplishments.ⁱ

Joy, on the other hand, is a deep-seeded contentment that comes from God. It is a small glimpse of the holy that breaks into our world and reminds us of God's presence that is with us and for us and in us. Joy is not dependent upon us nor is it dependent on the situation around us. Joy is sudden and quick and unpredictable. In fact, it is joy that often appears in the bleakest of situations to remind us that God is present with us working to bring hope and peace and love into a world that feels anything but.

Joy is what makes Mary sing at the news she is carrying the Christ child and what makes the shepherds dance as they return from seeing the baby Jesus. It is joy that arrives in that sudden "my heart may explode feeling of love" for your child as they sleep – even though just 3 hours earlier you thought God had seriously underestimated your parenting ability. Joy arrives in the whispers of advice and thoughts of loved ones who are no longer with us. Joy is the giggle that becomes a full-on laugh attack that often brings tears to your eyes. Joy is what pierces through the pain of sitting with someone who takes their last breath. In the most unexpected of places and often at the most unexpected of times, joy intrudes into the ordinary and brings the moments of holy that remind us God is in control.

As Frederick Buechner wrote: "God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy."ⁱⁱ

As a child, I remember well our Christmas Eve trek across town to the 11:00 p.m service at our church. I remember the large 800 seat cathedral style sanctuary was always full. The choir sat at the back in the balconied choir loft and they flanked a large organ. The service was similar to many other congregations – Advent candles, hymns, special music, and often a homily. But close to the end of that service – during the offering and right before midnight, the lights would dim and the pastors would begin to read the Christmas story..."In those days, a decree went out..."and so on. Right at midnight, the timing just right, the pastors would read this verse, "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying..." at the moment the lights would come up, and the organ would peel off that glorious intro to Joy to the World and the choir burst forth with the first stanza of "Joy to the World...the Lord is come," before the congregation – having experienced the startling nature of that news – joined in. Those words and their meaning are powerful. The shepherds who first heard them must have been terrified, but not 5 verses later, in that same passage, those same shepherds have been to see the Christ child and are now dancing their way back to the fields.

God sends joy to break into the places we least expect it. If joy comes to an ordinary unwed couple, in an out of the way town, seeking shelter in a stable full of animals, in the cold of the night... joy can certainly break in and find us in our 2020 Covid-burdened hot mess of a world.

Fear not... for I bring you good news of great joy! Joy for the world!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/10/28/touched-with-joy>

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