

Squamish United Church

December 15, 2019

Rev. Karen Millard

Scriptures

Isaiah 35: 1-10 (CEB)

Luke 1: 46b-55 (The Message)

Advent 3 — “Make the Blessings Known: Unabashed Joy”

Joy, Joy, joy, Unabashed Joy, Fearless Joy that’s the focus today. I told you last week that I have been on a life-long quest for Joy. I am doing some discernment work right now and in my course time on Thursday they talked about my personality type always being on a quest for inner peace because we are always on a quest to make everything okay both internally and externally. The spiritual focus for my personify time suggestion was to take time in stillness and this will help you discover your inner calm and be more connected with God. Okay. I get that. Our assignment this week was - even though it is advent and Christmas is in full view you are to take time in daily spiritual practice. Sometimes the assignments ministers get in continuing education are really hard and really good. The hope is that when we do this we will remember our purpose not the peoples purpose for us even in the busiest often most stressful week of the year.

Christmas is a wonderful time but the need for joy and love is real and it is intense and it is amplified at this time of year. I have a good friend who is a paramedic and he works Christmas Day this year. He is thankful he gets Christmas Eve off and he sometimes finds the hoopla with the in-laws a bit much so I remember in the past him saying it was okay if he worked Christmas. This time the response was “it’s all suicide on Christmas Day.” “Right” I said.

The need for joy and love is so intense it can be tragic. To sing a song of joy at such a time as this may seem daunting. How do we lift our voices in praise and thanksgiving when so much of our lives and the lives of others seem worthy of lament and intercession? The scripture readings for this morning show us the way. Isaiah 35 speaks words of comfort and promise in the midst of war and desolation; the chapter prior offers a terrible and terrifying vision of God’s wrath against the nations, and the chapter following describes threats toward Jerusalem. In between wrath and

threats, Isaiah writes about a chorus of creation saying to one another, “Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God.” As Barbara Lundblad puts it, “Isaiah dares to speak a word out of place. A word that refused to wait until things improved.” Unabashed Joy.

The Luke passage, the Song of Mary, strikes a similar tone. Mary is in a world of trouble: pregnant, not married. One could imagine that she felt fear, insecurity, ineptitude. And yet, she sings out with unabashed joy: God is great. God has done and will do great things. Holy is our God.

Madeline L’Engel’s poem First Coming expresses it this way.

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.
He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.
He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!¹*

It takes courage and love to sing our songs of joy in the midst of great suffering. Unabashed joy is different than being told in the midst of your suffering that, “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.” Which isn’t scriptural by the way and although I don’t sit in a theological place

¹ from A Cry Like a Bell

of believing God intentionally gives us that hard stuff, life sure can give us more than we can handle. Just ask someone facing depression in this season.

Sometimes days like this when we encourage one another to live with unabashed joy can come across as hollow or brash. How do we know the difference between real joy and something we try to put on? This week I long to speak joy into places of suffering so that it honours the depth of human feelings and the all encompassing love of God?

I spent a few extra hours working with Community Christmas Care this week and I spent a few extra hours stressing about my own job security and so to then sit down and write a sermon on joy was a real authentic challenge.

Both Isaiah and Mary speak of a particular and embodied joy: seeing eyes, hearing ears, gushing waters, growing seeds, the hungry filled, the humble lifted. They also speak of a particular and embodied suffering: feeble hands, fearful hearts, people scattered and brought down. We like to think if we just get through the suffering that joy will come: first comes suffering and then we progress to a joyful state of being. But the truth is, these deep feelings get tangled up together. We can go from one to another, back and forth, or feel them all at the same time. And the good news for today is that we can feel all these things, including suffering, and still joyfully proclaim a day when, “Gladness and joy will overtake [us] and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

As a counsellor one of the hardest, truest things I find myself saying to people is that one day it won't all be perfect. One day you will have moved past this moment, this incident or this sorrow may not consume every moment of your day but getting to that spot in life that day that place from now on where everything is perfect is just not realistic. You might have glimpses and moments of perfect joy but life will continue to happen as long as we are on this planet earth.

And the truth is Joy when we allow it to consume us in the depths of our being is God given. It is something others can't comprehend. I saw someone who lives this so completely this week. As Macky was wanting the news on Wednesday night a story stopped me in my tracks. I haven't been able to shake it. The story showed up in the Philippines national news in the midst of celebrations of the South East Asian games hosted in the Philippines this last week. This young girl is so remarkable that she landed a spot in a week of celebrating the athletic success of world

class athletes. Most of you won't understand much of this report says but the images have been stuck in my head for days so watch with me for a moment.

<https://news.abs-cbn.com/video/sports/12/11/19/batang-atletang-naka-sapin-lang-sa-paa-waging-3-ginto-sa-palaro>

This young girl (Rhea) reminded me of a Mary and Isaiah. She has been given a gift and she wants to be an example and inspire others. She can run like no one else. She is winning Gold medals in all her races and yet she can't even afford shoes. She tapes up her feet and puts a Nike symbol on it and she just does it. And what strikes me the most is the smile on her face. And I see Mary and I hear the magnificat.

We usually think of Mary as a young, acquiescent girl, not someone with much will of her own, really not much more than a vessel for God's coming realm. But Mary didn't just agree to birth a child; she agreed to be the first one to sign on for a cosmic revolution in which the world would be turned upside down. Mary literally put her body and her life on the line. The *Magnificat*, the song in which she sings of God's justice and her part in bringing it forth, is not the soft soliloquy of a puzzled young person with no will of her own - it is a celebration of God's drawing near - and her role, and our role in it. Her words rouse us from fear and anxiety to taking our place in the turning of the world.

No acquiescent girl this Mary! More like a persistent woman.

Religion columnist Nancy Rockwell has written:

"It is Mary's grace that has attracted God's attention. And what is this grace? It is what Luke shows us in her conversation and her actions – courage, boldness, grit, ringing convictions about justice. Not submissive meekness.

Grace is not submission. And the power of God is never meek. ... What we find her doing, over and over, is traveling, in journeys that involve risks and an element of danger.

Her recital of the Magnificat is a political manifesto, delivered fairly publicly, in the home of an official temple priest.... In Mary's manifesto there is evidence of deep thought, strong conviction, and a good deal of political savvy.

...The Greek word Luke uses for virgin is an unusual one, a very specific word that means

she has not yet born a child. Its precise meaning does not indicate sexual innocence. ... the focus is on her womb ...[and her openness to housing God, to hosting the incoming kingdom of God].

Mary, ... decides to bear a holy child – for a bold agenda: to bring the mighty down from their thrones; to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. ...

She gives birth in a barn, lies down animals, and welcomes weathered shepherds in the middle of the night. She is determined, not [docile]; free, not foolish; holy, not helpless; strong, not submissive. She beckons women everywhere to speak out for God's justice, which is waiting to be born into this world.”²

Like Rhea this young Iloilo girl she rejoices in the midst of the hardest times, when she has nothing and will be ridiculed for who she is but she say's a firm “no” and shares her gift and shines light in the world.

I feel like this is an important time for all of us to find a way to sing Mary's song, to live in Mary's way. In such a time as this, when our world is tilting away from the God's goodness, each one of us needs to find our own way to sing a Magnificat, a song of resistance, and a song of solidarity with the sacred desire for hope, peace, joy and love to reign in all creation.

Meister Eckhart, a 13th Century mystic wrote: We are all called to be mothers of God – for God is always waiting to be born. There is urgency now in that waiting, a time for us to decide how to be the voices of peace in our world. Mary has given us a song to sing, to sing with her courage and grace and guts. We may demure, we may, like every other person called in the Bible to speak and live out God's hope, say that we're too young, we're too old, we're too tired, and we're too busy. How can we possibly? We can because God will always be with us along the way. Birthing in us unabashed joy. Telling us to be not afraid. Teaching us how to fly in the face of fear. The presence of God has been birthed into our midst, and will be over and over again. The hope and compassion and love of God have come to us enveloped in the sweet smelling skin of a newborn baby. God is with us. Daniel Berrigan said it this way in his Advent Credo.

² **(No More Lying About Mary** December 3, 2015 by [Nancy Rockwell](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/no-more-lying-about-mary/)
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/no-more-lying-about-mary/>)

Daniel Berrigan (born 1921)

Advent Credo

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.³

³ From *Testimony: The Word Made Flesh*, by Daniel Berrigan, S.J. Orbis Books, 2004.
https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Daniel_Berrigan_Advent_Credo.shtml?fbclid=IwAR0kCAk7z0v3QjpZqMSN6HKUyktstaVmTK9nvWljqCXc4bUoqwbTZYH75E