

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Advent 3

December 13, 2020

Scriptures:

Isaiah 57: 14-19

Luke 1: 1-4; 26-56

Birth Joy

*“Discovering more joy does not, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreaks without being broken.” -
Desmond Tutu.*

A sermon on Joy this week has felt a bit hard to come by. Most of us are still taken aback by the shock that the celebrations we are used to having in the Christmas season have been put on hold due to health orders. It is okay to grieve that, it's hard and it makes most of us a little sad. Sure we will be okay and we will make it through and the world and individuals have faced Christmases as devastating or more than this before but that doesn't mean it isn't hard.

A sermon on joy seems almost impossible to preach this week in the year 2020, that is until you remember that Joy isn't about a giddy feeling, a permanent smile or jumping up and down in jubilee. Joy is so much deeper than that. Last Advent we worshiped with the series “Heaven and Nature Sing.” Celebrating Hymn writer Isaac Watt's interpretation of Psalm 98 “Joy to the World,” turning 300. “Joy to the world” invites us to sing a “new song”—a powerful cosmic performance of all creation being renewed and freed. Rather than “joy” being yet another word for “happiness,” we discovered that the depths of joy can be found in the midst of suffering, the work of justice, and the presence of compassion.

In today's gospel reading Mary sings "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. - Luke 1: 46b-55

I love Mary's story. It is so real and gritty. I imagine it was filled with way more drama and angst than we read in these few brief verses. When I think of Mary I think of the quote “Just because you carry it well doesn't mean it isn't heavy.” Right? A friend messaged me this quote this week knowing I needed to hear it (maybe you do too). Most of us are carrying on, because we have to carry on... but that doesn't mean the loads we are carrying aren't heavy. Life is known for giving us a heavy load, but this year the load feels like a ton of bricks a lot of the time. Some have it heavier than others, but I haven't met a soul yet that has had a life that is always sunshine and

rainbows. Life is difficult. It is full of struggles and misfortunes. Everyone is carrying a sadness inside that we know nothing about. Behind every set of eyes there's a soul at work. That's why we need to be gentler and more compassionate with each other especially now. We must be kind in this judgmental world because we are all in this together. We all carry a load that is difficult to carry on our own.

Mary certainly bore a load and yet she praised. That is probably why God chose her because the holy knew who could handle this weight, because when you are full of grace and wholly connected to the holy you can feel hope, love, joy and peace even in the midst of life struggles.

True Joy doesn't wait for struggle to be over. Mary "rejoices" during her pregnancy, a state of affairs that would have put her in a position of dishonour. She sings out powerfully because she knows that this turn of events will usher in the presence of justice for the oppressed and freedom for the captive.

Like Isaiah and Mary we need to cry out "remove barriers from my people's road" reconstruct the entrenched roads of injustice we have created in our society. Tend to the hearts that are crushed. The truth is Joy comes as we work, to break down barriers. This strength comes in trusting that God is working alongside us, inviting us to keep checking in about our own penchant to steer off course again and again.

We know what it looks like to for society to be steering off course. We know what it feels like to be waiting for solice. It seems we have been waiting forever. This state of waiting, that we have been in since March, helps us more than ever before, to understand this season of Advent and its call to wait and be watchful. We know exactly what we are waiting for. This year we really know what we want to be saved from. Once this pandemic is over, the restrictions lifted and we can return to "normal"- we will no longer be afraid... we hope. True, we know what it is to be waiting now more than ever and to call forth Joy this week might seem a bit trite but like those in exile, we need to look ahead and trust that there will be reasons to praise. God says "For those who mourn, I will create a reason for praise... I will heal them." It's a promise.

Mary's Magnificat is like a rallying protest speech, calling for justice and putting powerful words in the mouth of a self-proclaimed "servant." Many hearing this message for the first time would have heard their own occupation reflected in that word. Joy—deep human thriving—can happen in the midst of oppression when people are inspired to raise their voice, and proclaim their worth.

Just like the magnificat, so much music is written to bring life, hope, joy, and peace in the midst of hard times. Our Carols of resistance have told us that each week. Writers proclaiming hope in Challenging times. Music bringing hope, light and life is one of the reasons so many of us turn to music for healing and reprieve. It's why I love to go to places like Hilltop house and lead a hymn or carol sing because I watch familiar hymns bring life out of what sometimes appears vacant.

Personally, I am on a life-long quest for Joy. I desperately want the kind of joy and peace that Mary evoked. It seems a distant pursuit this year but I will not give up because it is just too

important to me. It is at the core of my faith driven life. Joy without ceasing, unending joy. It is what I long for my children to live with. Not false happy clappy, rose coloured glasses joy but joy that fills their lives with promise even when the going gets tough because we know it will.

Christmas is a wonderful time but the need for joy and love is real and it is intense and it is always amplified at this time of year. I remember last year a friend of mine who is a paramedic saying “it’s all suicide on Christmas Day.” Of course it is.

So, Let us pray for people struggling this Christmas with depression, with addiction, with loneliness and sorrow because if I think it is going to be a hard Christmas and I have a husband and two kids to help bring cheer to the day even though I will be without my extended family how will it be for those who are alone or feel alone or struggle to find love. Let’s take extra care this year to remember our friends and family members who do not have others with them this season. Because 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? How? Because we live in hope, love, joy and peace.

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

¹ from A Cry Like a Bell

It takes courage and love to sing our songs of joy in the midst of great suffering. But that is what Mary did. Mary may be portrayed as timid and mild but she must have been a young woman of great strength, determination, faith and courage. Mary didn't just agree to birth a child; she agreed to be the first one to sign on for a cosmic revolution that would turn the world upside down. Mary put her body and her life on the line to bring forth God's justice. Her life and song are 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. Mary's song of praise, conveys the joyful heart of a young girl who has every reason to be anything but joyful. Convincing your friends and family, particularly your fiancé, that you carry a child conceived by the Holy Spirit is a tough sell. Yet Mary's heart is filled with joy, knowing who God is bringing into the world through her.

The truth is much of the spiritual life is about letting go of control and the need to be right, and have all the answers. Mary is the perfect vessel to carry the Son of God precisely because she is humble, and because she is willing to say with Jesus in the garden: "Not my will but thy will be done." In aligning with, and finding joy in, God's purposes, Mary became the unshakable example of faith that has been venerated by millions of Christians through the ages. Joy does not come from getting what we want, but from receiving what God is doing through us — even when it seems like this is anything but a blessing. Mary beckons us to speak out for God's justice, which is waiting to be born into this world."

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 today.

Meister Eckhart, 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 resist, and be full of excuses like every other person called in the Bible to speak and live out God's hope. We may be ready to say that we're too young, we're too old, we're too tired, and we're too busy, we're too... How can we possibly?

We can because God is always 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. 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.”

The truth we must remember is joy will not come when this pandemic is over. In fact that isn't even what we are in the season of waiting for. This season of Advent reminds us that, as followers of Jesus, that our primary focus is not the end of Covid. No, in fact Jesus, is the one who we are waiting for. Jesus comes into the world to save us, not to save us from Covid 19 but from ourselves. Whether it is from our anger, selfishness, jealousy or addiction or our fear, loneliness or ill placed self-righteousness. All the things that will keep us separated socially or physically from one another even when the restrictions have ended. All of those things that keep us from living in joy, peace and right relationship. So, my friends, let us not spend our time and energy waiting for Covid to be over. Let's spend our time birthing hope, love, peace and joy into this broken world that needs the light of Christ today.

Joy to the world the lord is come.
Amen