

Be Strong, do not fear – and rejoice!
(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, Dec. 12, 2021)

The Divine Joy within me greets and honors the Divine Joy within each of you.

For the last few Sundays, the series 'The Inn' has been raising our awareness of how we and others “House the Holy,” and how we can open the inns of our hearts to live Jesus' story after the birth. This third Sunday of Advent, called Gaudette or Rejoice Sunday serves as a midpoint on our journey of quiet waiting where we can joyfully anticipation the birth of Jesus. Living in the middle of a pandemic that continues to evolve and place significant strain on the world, along with the other challenges of war, violence, natural disasters, hunger, displacement, uprisings, and racial struggles, it is not easy to rejoice, to feel joy or experience the excitement of Christmas.

This morning, we heard powerful messages from two prophets, Isaiah, and Mary, who brought the glad tidings of hope and joy, and their prophetic words would have enabled the people living in their world during troubled times to rejoice. Through their prophecies, we learn that people can and do experience hope and joy in the shadows of sorrow and the struggles of life. Isaiah speaks to his people who had become alienated from God because of their conduct and lived in a time of pending doom.

Despite the atmosphere of doom in Isaiah’s world he magnificently intersperses hopeful passages in his prophetic messages. With confidence he assures the people that despite what they are experiencing there is a deep well-spring of joy to draw from if they remember who they are, the people of God, and Isaiah prophesied that a child would be born who shall help them overcome.

For the prophets, joy was not about being happy; joy arises from what Cynthia Bourgeault calls mystical hope or divine love that resides deep within our being. Strength and joy can flow from this inner place of hope even amid the darkest moments and most trying circumstances of life. Isaiah assures the Israelites that a well-spring of joy is ever flowing and deep enough to dip into to help them get through turbulent times. Isaiah's exuberant prophecy is a declaration of that mystic hope that flows out as joy as he declares that the Holy One would never abandon them and dwells within and among them. Isaiah encourages the Israelites to sing with joy.

Like Isaiah, Mary’s prophetic song also shows that strength and joy can flow from this inner place of hope. In Latin, Mary's song is called the

Magnificat, which means "my soul magnifies the Lord" and it is a stunning song of praise, thanksgiving, joy, and hope. Her song is one of many expressions of joy found in the birth story in Luke. In his article "Mary's joy is for everyone," Catholic Priest Raniero Cantalamessa writes, Luke's account of the birth story is replete with joy. It starts with Zechariah and Elizabeth, who will experience "joy and gladness" at the birth of their son, and Mary's exclamation: 'My spirit rejoices in God!' when she learns of her aunt's pregnancy. "Then joy explodes fully at the birth of Christ in the song of the angels to the shepherds: "We bring you good news of a great joy!" (2:10)

Cantalamessa observes that "Luke's account is not about just a few scattered mentions of joy but rather about a steady stream of quiet, profound joy, a deep spiritual intoxication, but it is also sober." Those involved in the story do not exalt themselves; their joy arises from their faith in the actions of God in history – a God who acts." God's divine actions will enter the world, and God will do a new thing, and justice will prevail.

Mary's song delivers this message of justice quite profoundly. Rev. Grace Imathiu is a pastor of First United Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois and she also served many churches in Kenya. Rev. Imathiu talks about the old story and the new story of Mary. The old story envisions Mary as a very young Jewish woman, wearing a blue scarf or cape, who smiles sweetly and gives birth to the son of God. Rev. Imathiu brings the old story into perspective. She is a mother and says that as a woman is giving birth it is unlikely that she is smiling sweetly, and most deliveries take place in a sterile, safe place, not in an unsanitary barn.

The true story, or what she calls the new story, is about an unlikely 14-year girl who speaks as a wise prophet. Ordinarily a young, unmarried Jewish girl would be dismissed, seen as unimportant, and even face certain punishment or even death. In the new story Mary presents as a profoundly aware and insightful prophet despite her young age and circumstances. Mary is not a woman who is dismissed, diminished, or silenced. She has a prophetic view of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice, and she loudly proclaims that God will be triumphant in his justice -- and in this Kingdom of justice, all like her who are lowly in the sight of others will be lifted up and triumphant. She sings her message with the confidence of a seasoned prophet.

Mary prophesizes that God works through the vulnerable ones and lifts the lowly and downtrodden. God scatters the proud and the rich and fills those hungry for love and acceptance with good things. The proud, mighty, and rich are cast down or sent away, for they do not know the ways

of God. As Jesus did throughout his ministry, the Magnificat turns the social order inside out.

This new story is one of opening one's heart, seeing a new view, making room to receive God. It makes the claim that God dwells in the vulnerable and disregarded places; God makes Godself present in the birth of a ruler who would bring peace and justice. Mary sings joyfully of how the Holy One raises up the vulnerable and lowly. They are not discarded or dismissed; rather they are welcomed into the Kingdom of love.

Scholar and professor Rev. Jon Berquist considers Mary's Magnificat to be a song of "such vulnerability and of such joy that it's a moving experience. And she is singing with Jesus in the womb. These melodies of God working among the lowly is what Jesus first learns to dance to."

The new story of Mary, says Rev. Berquist, proclaims that "God is alive and active in moments of the vulnerability of labor, the defenselessness....God is alive and active in all situations of helplessness and defenselessness, in the places where people don't have other choices." When you trust and believe that the Divine One will do a new thing when the world feels as if it is falling apart, the inn of your heart where that mystical hope resides opens, and out flows the strength and joy required to help you cope, to survive, and to believe that compassion and justice can change lives and the world.

Dr. Marcia McPhee, the creator of "The Inn", spent a year visiting dying or struggling churches. She wrote the series to remind people and churches that sometimes our "problems feel so large that we feel incompetent to the task. And so, we freeze, or we are not sure what to do." No church or individual can fix it all, "but we can do what's right in front of us" by expanding our view beyond ourselves and our church.

As ancient as it may be, Mary's song is a proclamation that invites us to expand our view to see the possibility of a world that is just, equitable, and hospitable to all. We must open the inns of our hearts and the church's doors, so we have a better view of what's happening on the outside. Like Mary, the view we see are walls that divide, doors that are closed, injustice at full strength, hospitality that is needed, and strangers that need welcoming. When we expand our view further, we can like Mary envision the Kingdom of God, and kingdom of justice for all. Our full participation and cooperation are required for the faithful work of creating a world community in which all people experience a full life of joy, as an everlasting spring, which is the birthright of all God's people.

Isaiah and Mary's visions communicated hope and love when all seemed too much to bear, when all felt overwhelming, and when problems

felt too large to be solved. Rev. Berquist suggests that "in a world, as broken as ours, Mary's song reminds us that through us God can do something new. There is always the chance to start over, move beyond a repetition of our hard-learned lessons and change things that we might have considered unmovable." Our faith assures us that the impossible can happen.

Having the courage as individuals and as a church to do a new thing requires imagination, creativity, and resilience. Like Mary we must be ignited by a reckless daring that challenges us to live adventurously and not be held back by fears and limitations. As we participate with the Holy One in doing new things in our church, in our lives, in working for justice, that mystical hope within flows out as strength and joy in knowing that we are living our faith in ways that make a difference.

On this Advent of Joy, beloved ones, Mary's Magnificat is a remarkable example of what Julian of Norwich called "Transcendent Joy," a powerful emotion that makes Mary's song so inspiring and meaningful. Transcendent joy flows out from that mystical sense of hope deep within us when we see beyond our present situations and know that we are not alone and when we disallow the darkness of hatred and fear, struggle and loss, anger and hostility to diminish the other. Transcendent joy overflows when people raise their voices against injustice, see the beauty and value of each human and shine God's light of love in the world. Behind the strength of her vision I can imagine Mary saying, "YOU cannot take away my joy because YOU did not give it to me.... God gave me this joy. God is my hope and joy, and these are deep well springs within me into which I can always go for renewal and strength.

My friends, we must never forget that even amid the sufferings of our lives and our aching world, hope and joy help us not to succumb to the chaos of the present that sometimes threatens to pull us off-center. Let us expand our view and see what positive, life-giving new things God can do through the church and through us. We hear the hope and joy of Mary and Isaiah that encourage us to bounce back when life gets hard and difficult decisions need to be made.

On this Advent of Joy, let us open the inns of our hearts and allow strength and joy to flow out, and in doing so, become "a source of great transformation for many people.' Live into joy, reaching deeply into its ever-flowing spring and release it into the world. Make the blessings of hope and joy be known each day of your life. May we continually hear Mary's voice singing to us, "Be strong, do not fear – and rejoice!"