

Sermon: Summoning Rejoicing
Matthew 11: 2-11
Rev. Sharon Smith

I have this memory of my Mom and Dad walking into an old run down sea-side cottage 1 hour south of Durban in South Africa.

The man who built the cottage had died, and his widow had rented it out to a few fishermen. It stank of fish. The bath was painted green, cockroaches crawled in and out of the drains. And to top it off, the tropical Kwazulu Natal bush was so over-grown, you couldn't see the Indian Ocean.

I remember my Dad saying coyly – what do you think?
And my Mom, who is an in the moment and outspoken person:
You have got to be kidding Terry!

And then my Dad, with a bit of a shaky voice, began to speak out possibility.
He said: “we could really make this into something!”
He described what he saw in his imagination.
We walked to the bottom of the garden and he parted the leaves and branches,
and he showed us the ocean view.

This cottage, sold to our family for next to nothing, became our haven and holiday place for 20 years. Together, we restored it and it was like that shaky spoken imagined picture in my Dad's mind, was brought into reality a little bit more each year.

“The way you look at things is the most powerful force in shaping your life.”
writes Celtic Catholic author: John O Donahue.

And he writes this in the context of relationship.
He goes on to say:
“Spiritual Friendship awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you.”
Anam Cara, John O Donahue.

I see so much of this in the relationship between John the Baptizer and Jesus.
And especially in the interaction we read about today.

John – is dreaming of justice and judgement. He is dreaming of the Roman authorities and the tight oppressive religious order falling down into the fire.

He is remembered for his words: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire”

His cousin, Jesus sends him a message.

Affirming that God’s dream for justice and transformation is happening.

But not in the way that he was expecting.

It is coming through **love** for those who are poor, who are oppressed, who are left out, who are living with illness.

- **I wonder how Jesus’ vision of love and kindness, impacted John’s desire for justice and judgement?**
- **I wonder how Jesus’ way of walking with those who were hurting might of healed John’s disappointment, cynicism and anger at the oppressive system?**
- **I wonder how this relationship was transformative?**

And I thank God that, as we walk forward into the future, we are not alone.

Today we sang of another relationship.

The Magnificat – recorded for us in chapter 1 of Luke’s gospel.

This beautiful hymn of justice was sung in the context of two women from different generations coming together.

Think of Mary and Elizabeth – a teen who was pregnant and a woman in her senior years expecting a surprise child.

Mary journeys from Nazareth in Galilee to Zechariah’s house in a small country village in Judea to visit with her older cousin Elizabeth.

Two pregnant women in varying stages of their first pregnancy, both waiting for babies of promise. And in the larger context they are both Israelite women in exile - waiting for God to save their nation.

Mary, journeys to Elizabeth and...

is greeted and received by her.

And then the most profound exchange.

Elizabeth blesses Mary.

Two women in the same room – both expecting a child.

This might not have gone too well.

Comparison, out of our own sense of insecurity, is a common pitfall in human relationships.

Elizabeth could well have talked about herself, her disappointments in life, the failed attempts to start a family.

She could have let her journey overshadow Mary's process.

But instead, filled with the Holy Spirit Elizabeth chooses to offer words of blessing.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be[e] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (Luke 1: 42 – 45)

“The way you look at things is the most powerful force in shaping your life.”

Father Greg Boyle is an American Roman Catholic priest of the Jesuit order. He is the founder and director of Homeboy Industries, the world's largest gang-intervention and rehabilitation program, in Los Angeles.

His work is in rough and run-down neighbourhoods.
Chaos, lack of trust, post traumatic stress.

He takes the words of Blaise Pascal literally, who said:

“In difficult times carry something beautiful in your heart.” — Blaise Pascal

Father Greg Boyle carries something beautiful in his pocket – a pebble, a shell, an icon, a gem. To remind him that something different is possible, when he gets overwhelmed by the chaos and sadness of the gangs and the neighbourhood.

Cultivating eyes to see beauty and possibility is a spiritual practice. It does not come naturally to all of us.

- Training our eyes to see goodness
 - Training our ears to hear kindness
 - Training our mouths to say thank you
 - Training our minds to think about possibility
 - Training our hearts to trust
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As we read in Jan Richardson's poem – when things are bleak – let our blessing summon rejoicing.

Let the seeds soaked by tears turn to grain, to bread, to feasting.

Let there be... coming home.

These words are echoed in this simple poem by Mary Oliver, and with this I close.

“Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination, / calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting — / over and over announcing your place / in the family of things.”

We cannot wait for Joy. I will choose to delight in that which is good.

With God’s help.

Amen.