

December 13, 2020 (Focus: Luke 1:46b-55; Third Advent)

For such a time as this, we need joy. But, as with hope and peace, in such a time as this, joy can be quite elusive. That is, joy may be elusive if we think of joy in the usual way. If we think of joy in a spiritual way, then joy is not just what we need right now, but it is what we have right now, thanks be to God!

When we usually think of joy, we think of it is our happy response to certain circumstances in life. Joy can be produced by good health, good news, worldly prosperity, friendship, a good meal, or a romance, among other good things that happen in life. Our joy at such circumstances can be elevated when we give God thanks for such circumstances, but this is not the sort of “spiritual” joy that is meant when we talk of joy in this Advent season.

Mary’s circumstances were such that most of us would understand if she did not feel joy. Yes, she was happy to see her cousin Elizabeth, and joyful that Elizabeth and Zechariah would enjoy the gift of a child soon. But Mary’s own circumstances were such that we would not criticize her if she was feeling rather unjoyful. She was a poor peasant in a poor region living under an oppressive empire that cared nothing about her people’s welfare beyond what they could produce for the empire. Their lives were expendable, as demonstrated to them often by how little regard for their health and safety the empire showed them, and how easily they executed people. Even their religious faith was seen as a threat by the empire, tolerated as long as they didn’t push for the empire to care for the poor and the oppressed.

And then there was Mary’s personal life. The strange circumstances of her pregnancy cast a shadow on her wellbeing. She could be tossed aside by her fiancé, she could be cast out of her home and village for her condition. And the strange circumstances of her being with child, and who that child may be, well, she must have wondered.

Mary’s circumstances were not exactly joy-inducing circumstances. Yet in these circumstances she offers a song of joy. And in that song we come to understand that there is a difference between the sort of joy that is dependent on circumstances, and spiritual joy. For Mary does indeed have spiritual joy, joy that is not dependent on circumstances, but transcends circumstances. Spiritual joy, joy of faith, it is joy in God: joy in God’s nature, in God’s attributes, in God’s providence, in God’s covenant relations with God’s people and all creation. It is joy in the belief that God is love, that God is mercy and grace. And Mary is the

first to understand this in a new way, but not the last. The joy she sings of is joy in the new revelation that God is with us. It is joy in Emmanuel. Mary feels this sense of God with us growing within her, and today we celebrate this anew, the sense that God is with us, and God is love, and God intends good for us, and for this we can have joy, in whatever circumstances we have found ourselves in before, or that we find ourselves in now, or that we will find ourselves in in the future.

“God with us” is such a powerful revelation, but is one we have celebrated before and maybe we take for granted how strange and wondrous a revelation it is. Even in Mary’s time there were still those whose beliefs would fall more under the category of superstition than of religion. Mary and her people were surrounded by such superstition, for the empire’s beliefs were all about superstition. Theirs was a belief in gods who would trick or punish humans; a spirit of gloom and fear. So to face the revelation that God was not about standing above us, throwing down punishment from the heavens, but was about being with us, in our struggles, and not abandoning us or watching us wallow in punishment, but about caring about us enough to take on our common lot and to love us and offer us peace and hope – that couldn’t help but elicit a sense of joy in Mary, and it can’t help but elicit a sense of joy in us.

What you rejoice in will show what you value the most. What do you rejoice in? Do you rejoice in a God whose love isn’t just present when our circumstances are going well, but who is with us always? Whose love isn’t manifest in fleeting and meager earthly powers, but whose power of love and grace transcends whatever can be created here on earth?

These things we talk about in each Advent week, these qualities of hope, peace, joy, and love, these are wondrous indeed because they allow or make room for paradox. We can have spiritual hope and yet entertain doubts about where God is in what is going on in the world. We can have spiritual peace yet also be angry about the way things are and cry out for change. We can have spiritual joy, yet be sad and experience sorrow. Because we have love, God’s love, we can live through doubt, because God’s love gives us hope. Because we have God’s love, we have God’s peace, which can sustain us in our work to advocate for all creation to live in peace and harmony. Because we have God’s love, we can rejoice, even through tears.

My soul cries out with a joyful shout
That the God of my heart is great
And my spirit sings of the Wondrous things
That you bring to the ones who wait
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight
And my weakness you did not spurn
So from east to west shall my name be blest
Could the world be about to turn?
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

Though I am small, my God, my all, you
Work great things in me
And your mercy will last from the Depths
Of the past to the end of the age to be
Your very name puts the proud to shame
And to those who would for you yearn
You will show your might
Put the strong to flight
For the world is about to turn
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears
For the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

From the halls of power to the fortress tower
Not a stone will be left on stone
Let the king beware for your
Justice tears ev'ry tyrant from his throne
The hungry poor shall weep no more
For the food they can never earn
There are tables spread, ev'ry
Mouth be fed
For the world is about to turn
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn
Wipe away all tears
For the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

Though the nations rage from age to age
We remember
Who holds us fast
God's mercy must deliver us from the conqueror's crushing grasp
This saving word that our forebears
Heard is the promise which holds us bound
'Til the spear and rod can be
Crushed by God
Who is turning the world around
My heart shall sing of the day you bring
Let the fires of your justice burn

Wipe away all tears
For the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

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Let the fires of your justice burn
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For the dawn draws near
And the world is about to turn!

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Hal Hopson

This Advent and Christmas, things are not as we want, in fact things are not going well, but we will be ok, for we are God's people, we are God's creation, and God intends good for us. We do not know when the fullness of God's time will come, but we do know that whatever the times are like, we have the fullness of God's love and the fullness of God's saving grace. Because we know this to be true, we can feel the hope and peace and joy of the Advent season, whatever our circumstances, for the hope and peace and joy that God blesses us with transcend our circumstances. Thanks be to God!

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Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer. Creator God, gracious God, we are grateful for your love each day, a love that sparks our own loving to the world. We rely on your gracious mercy in these days; do not forsake us. Remind us again and again that your Spirit is indeed always at work in the world. Help us to see it, to recognize it when it is blessing us and strengthening us and encouraging us.

There are so many among us, in our community, and in the world suffering in body, mind, and spirit, in need of your healing compassion and care – grant all in need an experience of your renewing touch, especially...

Bless those for whom the isolation is weighing on their mental and emotional well-being. We hold in our prayers today especially all those working in area health care facilities – hospitals and nursing homes and first responders – for they are feeling the strains of the rising COVID cases. Give them strength, and grant them rest, and keep them well.

Moment of silent meditation...

Gracious God, as we await anew for the coming of Emmanuel, as we wait to feel you with us anew, fill us with peace. We pray for peace in our world – an end to war and violence on our streets and in our homes. Without peace there can be no justice, and we so seek justice for all those who have experienced discrimination and a lack of welcome. We pray for peace in our minds and in our hearts, as we struggle with how to care but not be overwhelmed by the caring. We know you intend peace for us, for we have heard it in the words of our teacher and spiritual guide and savior, the one we call the Prince of Peace, in whose name we pray. Amen.