

## **“ADVENT JOY”**

**By Rev. Victor Kim**

**Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46b-55**

(12-15-19) Advent 3

### **Mary, how can you sing? How can you possibly sing?**

Poor, pregnant and unmarried, how, Mary, can you sing? How can you sing when your life's been turned upside down? How can you sing when you know that you will always have to deal with the whispers of the so called virgin who became pregnant even before her marriage took place? How can you sing when in your poverty, you aren't given even a year or two to at least build up some financial stability to care for a child? Mary how can you sing when not even your wildest dreams could have prepared you for something so unbelievable as an angel telling you that you would be the mother of the Son of God?

I mean how many teenaged girls dream about becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit, having to tell their fiancée or boyfriend that the child in her womb is the result of an act of God; I mean can you imagine being Joseph? Really Mary? If you don't want to marry me, just say so. If you're in love with another man, at least have the decency to tell me instead of telling me that God's responsible! I mean, how do you compete with God? **How can you sing Mary?**

**But sing she does and she does because Mary knows that despite all that's wrong with the world, with her world, God is still right.** Our text this morning is called the Magnificat, the song of Mary. Mary sings because, though she knows all too well the reality of hardship, she also has a perspective which belies her youth. Mary chooses not to groan about what's wrong, but chooses to place her hope in what's right, in God.

We didn't read the part of the story where Gabriel tells Mary that she's found favour with God and she would be the mother to Jesus, but most of us know the story pretty well. When the angel Gabriel tells Mary the news, Mary says to the angel, **how can this be, since I am a virgin?**

A reasonable question by any standard. The angel responds, the Holy Spirit will do this. I mean what kind of answer is that? **It's no answer at all, is it?**

Mary might be young and she might be a virgin, but she's no fool and her mother has prepared her for what will happen once she gets married. She knows basic biology even if she's never been to school. But at the end of the conversation with the angel, Mary says, **here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.** Mary doesn't have a clue how God will do what has been told to her, but in the end she gets the relationship right.

Here am I, the servant of the Lord.

**I am the Lord's servant, the Lord doesn't answer to me, I answer to God.**

Now you don't go from asking the angel of the Lord how God plans to do this miraculous thing to saying, let it be with me according to your word, without some sort of prior relationship with God.

I imagine Mary, a young Jewish woman, raised in a Jewish home, familiar with scripture, having heard the stories of God's deliverance of God's people from bondage and slavery in Egypt, how God led the people of God into the promised land and even now, how despite the oppression of the Romans, God has promised to restore the people and to send a savior, the Messiah.

Mary knows her prophets, including Isaiah, who foretold, **therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.** So, while she doesn't understand how God will do what

God has said he will do, **she knows enough about God to know that God will do it, just as God has always done for his people.**

She hasn't the first clue about the biology of what's going to happen to her, **but she's sure of the theology.** God is good, God is up to good, good, not only for her, but for all people, for all creation. **She doesn't know everything, but she knows enough to trust God.**

Mary's is an amazing faith, rooted in deep trust in God. She could have said no. If she had no prior relationship with God, with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with the God of Moses and Joshua, the God of David and Solomon, the God of Elijah and Isaiah, maybe she just walks away, unable to comprehend what has just been said, but she knows God, not everything, but enough, enough to trust in God's goodness and God's saving power. So, Mary says yes and she does so by accepting the high calling God has placed upon her with great joy and hope and faith. Mary sings,

**My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour 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.**

My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

Mary moves from fear and perplexity to trust and obedience, then finally to joy. This Sunday is the Sunday of joy in the season of Advent. We have marked the Sundays of Hope, Peace, Joy and next week we end Advent with Love. Sometimes we forget that these qualities of hope, peace, joy and love aren't really about us, **but that they are about God.** Yes, they eventually are to be embodied in our faithful response, but they originate in God, with God.

It's the hope of God which allows us to move from despair and to act with courage. It's the vision of God's peaceable kingdom which informs and equips our work for peace in the midst of our conflict. It is God's joy in doing what God has always intended with his creation that allows us to move from fear, sorrow and despair to trust and to joy because we know that God is good and is up to good, even if we don't have all the answers. And it will be God's love for us, born as the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, that redeems the world from hate, anger and sin.

**Our joy is rooted in what God has promised, what God has done and will do going forward.** And so it is, that along with Mary, we can sing with joy, rejoice in God our savior, even when sorrow and despair seems all around us. On Wednesday of this week, the Swedish teenager and climate activist Greta Thunberg was named as TIME Magazine's 2019 Person of the Year. Maybe you disagree, maybe there might have been better choices, but I don't think that any of us could have been more petty about the selection of Thunberg than one Donald J. Trump.

In response to Greta's selection, and remember, she's just a 16 year old girl, Trump, the President of the United States, tweeted, So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!

And if that weren't petty enough, his campaign sent out another tweet in which Trump's head is superimposed on Thunberg's body. Come on, really? Kind of makes you despair that the so called leader of the free world is consumed with petty jealousy about a 16 year old girl. You'd think he'd have other things to worry about these days!

But maybe Trump knows more than we think. **Maybe Trump knows that seemingly powerless young girls can be used by God to bring about amazing change in the world.** Mary has a perspective which belies her youth. She sees a vision of what this child will mean, not only for her, but for all humanity, for the poor and the hungry, for the hurting and mourning, for the lost and lonely, for the weak and powerless, for all people.

**Mary sings because she knows that God will make a way where there is no way.** And just listen to her sing.

**His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.**

**He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.**

Forty years ago the government of Guatemala banned this song, the Magnificat, because unlike Away in a Manger, this prayer was apparently considered subversive, politically dangerous and might incite the oppressed people to riot.<sup>1</sup>

**I wonder whether we'd be brave enough to sing this prayer today and mean what we pray.**

I always marvel at how Mary gets the tense wrong in her song, singing as if those things she sings about, the proud being scattered in their thoughts, the powerful being brought down, the rich sent away empty while the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled with good things, singing that God has done these things already, when we know that the proud are still the proud and the powerful haven't been brought down nor the rich sent away empty. We know that the lowly are still often pushed down and the hungry are not filled with anything.

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<sup>1</sup> John Ortberg, The Christian Century, December 2009

But in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor,  
**prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it...as an eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone.**<sup>2</sup>

You see, our joy cannot be limited to what the eye can see or the ear hear. **Our joy needs to be rooted in our trust in God, that God will do what God says he will do, just as God has always done.** In the reading from Isaiah 35 this morning, we get this astonishing picture of a renewed, restored creation, where the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert rejoice and blossom...we see a vision of time when the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped and waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. A highway shall be there and it shall be called the Holy Way, the unclean all not travel on it, it shall be for God's people, no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray...and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, they shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. **This is the vision Isaiah shared with the people of God in the midst of their exile, in their sorrow, and it's the vision that is shared with us today in the midst of the too common sorrow of our world.**

It's a vision of a creation restored to its intended glory, for people, but also for the earth. It's a vision that the likes of a 16 year old girl, unelected, without formal power or authority, can still proclaim, a creation of which each of us are charged to be faithful stewards over. I don't know if Greta Thunberg has any religious beliefs, I suspect not, and in reality, no matter how vocal she has been and despite the incredible publicity she has garnered over the past year, there has

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Singing Ahead of Time*, in *Home by Another Way*

been, sadly, precious little change in the policies and practices of the countries of the world around climate change. It would take a revolution to move most countries from where we are now to where we would need to be to meet our Paris Accord targets. **We could easily look at the numbers and despair; we could drown in our sorrow. Or we could take the view that Mary takes.**

We can read Isaiah and remember that this is a vision given to Isaiah from God, the God who not only says he will deliver his people, but who has done so. This is a vision from a God who not only promises that light will shine in the darkness, but has come to us as that light. This is a vision from a God who not only declares that he loves us, but has embodied that love in becoming human in Jesus of Nazareth and taking our sins upon himself on the cross. This is a vision from a God of life who did not let even the finality of death prevent him from resurrecting Jesus from death to life and from making that eternal life available to each and every one of us. We can look around and sorrow at the sad state of too many things in our world today, or we can join with Mary in joyfully declaring that God will do what God has said. **It doesn't for a moment absolve us of responsibility in working toward that vision of God.**

Mary didn't just give birth to Jesus then abandon him. She raised him as his mother, tending to his hurts and pains, his growth and maturing. She loved him and worried about him, adored him and cried for him. She did what all loving mothers do, until that time came when Jesus did what God said that he would do.

If God became human in Jesus, if God's love overcame the barrier of our sin and if God has already overcome death and if God's light shines in the darkness and no

darkness can ever overcome it, **if we believe this, why wouldn't we believe that God will restore all creation, including us, to the vision he has set out for us?**

Why wouldn't we believe that God will scatter the proud and bring down the powerful? Why wouldn't we believe that God will lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things while sending the rich away empty?

**Not only would we believe it, we would speak of it as if it were already a reality.**

We can, because we know God. We don't know everything about this God, but we know enough. We know that God loves us enough to become one of us as a child born to a young, confused but ultimately trusting girl. We know that God loves us so much, all of us, that Jesus said that anyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

We know that the God who has raised our Lord Jesus has also prepared places for each of us in his presence. We don't know all the details, we don't know the when's or the how's exactly, we don't know why some things take so long and why sometimes things don't work out as we have hoped or prayed for, but we know enough. And in knowing what we already know, we can trust that God will do what God has said he will do. We can join with Mary in magnifying our Lord. We can join with Isaiah in proclaiming a renewed creation where all will live in harmony and peace, where all will have enough and all life will flourish.

**And our spirits can rejoice in God our savior because we know that God is faithful.**

**How can Mary sing? How can she not?**

**Can we join with Mary in her song?**

Though there is so much wrong, God is still right.

God is still right because he is faithful, always remembering, always merciful, from generation to generation. **I pray that we would know what Mary knew, that God has broken through the wrongs and will make all things right.**

May that truth move us to accept with joy the high calling of God in our lives, moving us to hope from despair, granting us clear vision through a sea of tears, working in us healing of mind, body and soul, and the desire to work for peace even in the face of such daunting odds, and the joy of knowing that our God is always faithful.

**Where there was no way, God has made a way in Jesus the Christ, the child of the manger, the Lord of the world. And that, friends, is indeed something to sing about!**

Thanks be to God, Amen!

***Written by Rev. Victor Kim  
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