

December 24 – Fourth Sunday of Advent, Joy

This is a funny day because it is the 4th Sunday of Advent as well as Christmas Eve. This morning we are going to encounter Joy as we continue to anticipate the arrival of our tiny, baby Jesus.

To enter into a place of joy, I want to begin by sharing three different scripture lessons. The first is Luke's testimony of the song of Mary as she entered into risky servanthood for the Lord.

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶ Mary said,

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

⁴⁷ In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

⁴⁸ He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored

⁴⁹ because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name.

⁵⁰ He shows mercy to everyone,

from one generation to the next,

who honors him as God.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

⁵² He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones

and lifted up the lowly.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things

and sent the rich away empty-handed.

⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,

remembering his mercy,

⁵⁵ just as he promised to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

-and-

Romans 16:25

²⁵ May the glory be to God who can strengthen you with my good news and the message that I preach about Jesus Christ. He can strengthen you with the announcement of the secret that was kept quiet for a long time.

-and-

Nehemiah 8:10b

"...the joy from the Lord is your strength!"

There is a popular song for the Christmas season that poses the beautiful question, "Mary did you know...?"

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?

This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you.

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy will calm the storm with his hand?

Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?

When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God.

The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again.

The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb!

Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?

Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?

That sleeping child you're holding is the great I am.

The short answer to the questions is – yes. Mary knew. The song is beautiful and it helps us to ponder the powerful role that Mary played in God's big picture plan of salvation. But the magnificat or Mary's Song that I read as our first scripture today is the answer. Mary, 16-ish years old, knew that what was happening was a God-sized thing. Did Mary know the specifics of walking on water and so on...perhaps not down to the detail. But make no mistake that Mary knew what she was getting into.

An angel made the trip to earth to tell Mary exactly what she was getting into. She asked pertinent questions like how is this whole baby thing going to happen? Are you going to ask me to sin, the go against God's established order for sexuality to make this baby. Nope. God's going to take care of God's plan without asking anyone to sin. No ends justifies the means here.

Mary knew that the baby she would bear would be God's Son. She knew that her obedience to God and her love of this child would also lead to heartache and heartbreak. In the recent movie "Wonder Woman," a line from Diana's mother captures it well as she watched her daughter leave the safety of her homeland and enter the world of humans.

"You have been my greatest love, and today you are my greatest sorrow."

The reality is that with the capacity to love much comes the capacity to be hurt, to be grieved. Mary knew that. Mary wasn't some simpleton that God strong-armed or duped into being God's servant. Mary was faithful and went into serving God with both knowledge and joy.

This is important for us as we choose to live faithful lives in Christ today. Knowledge and joy can coexist. Even the kind of knowledge that Job has – the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. This is one reason why Paul writes as he does to the Romans.

Romans 16:25, *"²⁵ May the glory be to God who can strengthen you with my good news and the message that I preach about Jesus Christ. He can strengthen you with the announcement of the secret that was kept quiet for a long time."*

The plan of redemption through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus was kept secret for a very long time. It is a secret no longer. For ages people had to live as best they could according to the Law. And then to get right after they couldn't adhere to the Law they had to bring a sacrifice, an offering and make a public acknowledgement of rebellion, promises not kept, or downright evil, and be set right with God. They did this over and over and over.

In Jesus, God didn't change the rules, a sacrifice, an offering was still the payment for sin, for rebellion, promises not kept, and for evil. In Jesus, God became the payment and made the payment, once and for all. We no longer bring sacrifices of animals to pay the debt of our sin, our rebellion, our broken promises or our evil. We come to the foot of the cross to confess sin and receive forgiveness over and over. We come to the table of grace that is set for communion (as it will be in our service this evening), and remember the power of Emmanuel: God with us.

And as we live lives full of inconsistencies, ups and downs, good and bad, success and failure, we can do it all with the joy of the Lord because God has given us the eternal good news of Jesus – salvation, grace, forgiveness, mercy, relief from guilt, shame and feeling like we have to earn our way into God's good favor – that good news is ours right now.

And quite frankly, even before the birth of Jesus, the joy of the Lord was always available as the prophet Nehemiah proclaims to God's people in Nehemiah 8:10b *"...the joy from the Lord is your strength!"*

The joy from the Lord is our strength. And if we need strength then I am supposing there is a recognition that life can leave us weak or with things to be done that will

require strength we do not always feel like we have on our own. And because we know from the Apostle Paul that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), we can receive that strength into our weakness in the form of joy.

And isn't that counterintuitive, that God's strength comes as joy – even in the tough, frustrating, aggravating, depleting moments. That notion reminds me of one of my favorite lines in a movie ever. It is Dolly Parton's line in *Steel Magnolias* when she says, *"Laughter through tears is my favorite emotion."*

Joy in the midst of chaos or sorrow or trial or pain. Joy in the midst of work, worry, doubt, and weakness. Joy. Joy in the midst of things that threaten to wipe us out and drain our energy. Joy that comes from the Lord. It is our strength.

And it was Mary's strength as well. Mary knew that her life would be far from easy or storybook or textbook from the moment the angel appeared. But just like laughter through tears is a great emotion, joy through sadness – something eternal that shines through something temporary – is sustaining and life-giving.

This life-giving, sustaining joy is ours today just as it is was Mary's all those years ago. We need only to choose to see the faithfulness and mercy of God as Mary saw it.

Luke testifies that Mary said, but what if Amanda said or Don said or Steve said or Kim said, *"With all my heart I glorify the Lord! ⁴⁷In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior."*

What if we all glorify the Lord from the deepest part of who we are?

⁴⁸ *He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.*

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored

⁴⁹ *because the mighty one has done great things for me.*

Holy is his name.

Oh my goodness how good God has been to me and shown me favor! What about you? Has God gifted us with some tough situations through which God would change the world? Maybe we have been favored not completely like Mary, but favored nonetheless because God has trusted us with something very precious to do and perhaps someone very special to care for.

⁵⁰ *He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm.*

He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

⁵² *He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,

⁵⁵ just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

And God is still merciful, strong, and doesn't encourage or reward the arrogant and proud. He still stands with and lifts up the lowly, the simple, the outsider, the strange or the weird. And God still remembers his mercy, his promises, and his love.

And because God is all these things. Because God is good all the time, we have access to a resounding joy that echoes through the ages.

Let us pray...