

The Possibility of Joy  
Luke 1:39–55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24  
Sunday, December 20, 2020 (Advent 4)

Usually, I wouldn't be preaching today, because the fourth Sunday of Advent is always the day of our choir's annual Christmas cantata. This whole chancel area is filled with musicians – singers, string players, woodwind and brass players, harpists, percussionists – so much so that I can't even sit where I usually do; I have to put a folding chair right here in the pulpit. Iris and the choir work for *months* to present what is always a big, beautiful arrangement of songs that draw us into the story of the coming of Christ and the *feeling* of this season. It's really *this Sunday* each year that helps put me in a place where I can start working on the Christmas Eve sermon. This is something that we look forward to every year, and we don't *have* it this year, because of this pandemic.

One of the losses that we have felt so deeply this year is the loss of in-person music. Of singing *together*. And we've tried to find ways to fill that void and keep the music going. For us, it's been recording hymns that we include in the videos. Back in the summer, I saw some places doing drive-in concerts, where musicians would be on a stage, and people would pull up in their cars, all distanced from one another, and have a concert outdoors. A lot of musicians have been doing concerts online. Andy Gullahorn, who played a concert here back in 2013, has been holding multiple "happy hour" concerts each week online from his home, where he and his wife sit in front of a camera, playing songs and interacting with the viewers. He has even managed to make it personal and intimate. He has the viewers play games of Family Feud together in between songs. It's a lot of fun, and that's something that we never would have had without this pandemic.

Every year around this time, there is a concert tour by a Christian songwriter named Andrew Peterson. The tour is called *Behold, the Lamb of God*, and it is a beautiful, fun, amazing retelling of the story of the coming of the messiah – the whole story of Christ from before creation through Moses and the prophets to his birth and glorification as King of kings. They've been doing it for over 20 years. Jen and I have been in person before, and we absolutely love it. Well, obviously, they couldn't do the tour this year. But two weeks ago, they played a show at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, and they streamed it online so that people all over the world could watch. Jen and I watched in our living room, and it was so incredibly well done and moving and beautiful. So we're finding all these creative ways to keep the music going, but I think even the musicians would tell you, it's not the same as being there, in that room filled with music, singing along.

We can sit in our homes and watch *Hamilton* on Disney Plus, but there's an *energy* when you're there live, a *feeling* that just can't be replicated.

And I think that's been the case for *us*, here. While Iris and Jeff Estabrook and Cat Duncan and the bells and the Joy Messengers have done such a great job throughout the past nine months of leading us in music virtually and keeping us connected to that aspect of our worship and our life together, there is something about *singing together*, an energy and a feeling and a connection to those around us that just isn't the same virtually. And there's nothing we can do about that. Because of the nature of this virus and how it's spread, this is just the year that singing has been taken away from us. Obviously we can still sing, but in-person, communal singing; that's something we have lost this year.

And that's really *hard*. It's such a big part of our life together. It's such a big part of our *faith*. Especially at this time of year. To gather in this room on Christmas Eve and sing with 200 other people, "O come, all ye faithful; o come, let us adore him." It's one of my absolute favorite things of the entire year. It is a release of all this pent-up Advent energy and hope, our waiting and longing for a savior. It is an act of *joy*. And after this year, we need it now more than ever.

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We talked last week about how, when Mary received the news of her pregnancy from the angel, this would *not* have been good news for her. For a teenage girl who was engaged but not yet married to find herself pregnant in a way that she couldn't fully explain to anyone else (especially her fiancée) in a rational, believable way, that would have been *life-threatening* news for her. But she gives herself to that, and with the threat of social and even *physical* death hanging over her, she goes to see her relative Elizabeth. And when she walks into the house and greets Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps in joy.

*Joy*. Mary wasn't coming to share the good news of her pregnancy. She was coming because she was *terrified*, and she *needed* someone. Someone who would be there for her and understand and love her through this. And in the midst of her fear and uncertainty, Elizabeth greets her with *joy*. She injects *joy* into the confusion and terror surrounding Mary, and she says, "Blessed! Blessed! Blessed! Even in *this*, you are blessed!"

And Mary's response to that joy is to *sing*. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit *rejoices* in God my Savior." *Rejoices*. The act of *expressing joy*. Even in the midst of her fear and uncertainty, Mary *sings* and expresses the *joy* that is within her. Because *joy* is not the same as *pleasure* or *happiness*. Those things are *external*, brought about by something *outside* of you; something *other* than you. Pleasure and happiness depend upon your circumstances or

surroundings; what's going on around you, what you're *doing*, or what's *happening* to you. But *joy* is *internal*. It results from a *fullness*, an abundance *inside of you*. Joy does not depend on your circumstances, surroundings, or activities. It can exist *apart* from those things. You can be struggling, emotionally or physically, and *still dwell in joy*.

There's a verse in Proverbs that says, "Whoever loves *pleasure* will suffer *want*." It will eventually be taken away from you. But *Jesus* says in John's gospel, "*No one* will take your *joy* from you."

Mary sings, she expresses her joy, not because of what *she* is doing (her circumstances or what's going on in her life), but because of what *God* has done. Her whole song is about, "God has looked with favor on me. God has done great things for me. God is holy. God is merciful. God is powerful and *uses* that power to lift up the lowly and feed the hungry, while casting down those who have become powerful and rich at their expense." You see, Mary doesn't have joy because she is *singing*. She is *singing* because she has *joy*, a fullness that exists inside of her that *no one and nothing else can touch* because it is the result of an awareness of God's presence with her and love for her.

Singing is not what gives us joy. That's especially important to remember in this time when singing together has been taken away from us. Singing is not what gives us joy. Singing is an *expression* of our joy, of the deep-seated awareness of God's presence with us and love for us. Jesus says, "Abide in my love...so that my joy may be in you." That kind of joy is something that no one, nothing can take away from us, even in a time such as this.

Now, there are times when it is not easy to *feel* that. Times when it is really hard to *see* or *feel* God's love. Times that make it really hard to *feel* joy, because the only thing that we are *full* of is fear or pain or sadness. But that's part of what *Advent* is about. It's a reminder that we are still *waiting* for the *fullness* of Christ's joy to come into this world and into our lives. Advent reminds us of the *possibility* of joy. You might not always *see* it or *feel* it, but even in the *worst* of times, joy is a *possibility*. We just have to remember to *look* for it. Not *out there*...but *in here*. And if we look hard enough, we'll *find something*. Some small, simple thing that allows us to experience or just *glimpse* joy, even if it's only for a moment. Joy is *always* a *possibility*.

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This is one of the things Paul is getting at in his letter to the Thessalonians. This is the earliest letter that we have in the New Testament that Paul wrote. It was written when the church in Thessalonica was brand new, just a few weeks or months old. But already, they have been experiencing persecution, challenges from the culture around them in which they no longer fit. This shift to becoming followers of Christ has displaced them in the larger society. They are experiencing a kind of social death, and they are struggling with that. And it is into the midst of those struggles and challenges that Paul injects the possibility of joy.

He says, "Rejoice *always*!" Joy is *always* a possibility. It can *always* be present. "Pray without ceasing." Keep yourself mindful of God's presence with you and love for you. That's what prayer is, right? Dwelling in the presence and love of God. "Give thanks in *all circumstances*." *All* circumstances? Persecution? Pandemic? Paul says to that, "Do not quench the Spirit." Do not deny the power of God's Holy Spirit to do something amazing and life-giving even in the most difficult circumstances. Give thanks because maybe *these* circumstances are just an opportunity for you to come to experience God's presence and love in a new way. So yes, give thanks in *all* circumstances for what God is able to do, even in *this*.

As one author says, “All of life can be a joyous celebration of the presence of God and salvation. This is a matter not of how one *feels* but of what *God has done*.”<sup>1</sup> Mary rejoices, not because of how she *feels*, but because of what *God has done*. Paul calls upon the Thessalonians to rejoice, not because of how they *feel*, but because of what *God has done*. *We* can rejoice, despite how we *feel*, because of what *God has done* and what *God is doing*, even now.

The ability to sing together might have been taken away from us this year, but the *reason* we sing has not. We sing to give glory to God; to express our *joy* for what God has done, but also our *hope*, our *longing* for what God is *able* to do. And I want to invite you to practice that with me now by singing the Doxology together. Whether you are singing as an expression of joy or as an expression of longing, let us praise God from whom all blessings flow.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow.*

*Praise him all creatures here below.*

*Praise him above, ye heavenly host.*

*Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, pg. 646.