

Joy and Justice

Luke 1:39-56

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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The Christmas season is full of many joys—and most of them have nothing to do with the birth of the Messiah. There is the joy of having greenery and colored lights in your home and in the church. There is the joy of singing familiar songs with friends. There is the joy of giving gifts to people you love, and the joy of receiving gifts and cards and expressions of love. There is the joy of chocolate and fruitcake and special cookies only made once a year. For some of us there is the joy of having the kids home again.

But the joy that we focus on today, on the third Sunday of Advent, is the joy of the arrival of the Messiah and his kingdom. We want to keep Christmas sweet and sentimental, to make it about the coming of a baby—someone soft and cuddly—and perhaps we are willing to make Christmas about the coming of someone who will bring us forgiveness and bring us peace with God. But when Mary opens her mouth and begins to sing praises, she makes it clear that for her Christmas is about the coming of God's kingdom. It's about God coming through for the oppressed and changing the world. It's about all those promises we've heard regarding how the world will change when God's chosen one comes and takes over. If we want to sing along with Mary in the Magnificat, we discover very soon that the Magnificat is not just about her joy that she's going to have a baby. If we go beyond the first stanza, the song becomes political, because it is rejoicing about what God will do about the terrible gap between the rich and the poor.

Not that Mary isn't happy to be pregnant. She is. She's downright giggly as she comes into the house of her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant. You might not think Mary would be so happy about turning up pregnant as an unmarried peasant teenager. In Galilee in her day, she could be punished, even put to death, for having a baby out of wedlock. Her society wasn't all that different from Afghanistan today, where that poor young woman was sentenced to twelve years in prison for adultery after she was raped. Mary could have been anxious about her future; almost surely she had no money. Who knew at this point if Joseph would stick with her? But all these things that might worry her are at least put out of her mind for a while when she hears Elizabeth speaking as a prophet, inspired by the Holy Spirit, saying, "Blessed are you among women! Blessed is the child you will bear! You are the mother of my Lord! I can't believe that the mother of the Messiah would come to visit me!"

It's one of the great woman-to-woman scenes in all of literature. It was a common subject for medieval and Renaissance paintings with the title "The Visitation." Here were two strong women, one old and one young, both touched by the Spirit and a part of God's great plan for the world. And they are also two cousins who are unexpectedly pregnant at the same time, greeting each other for the first time, both of them giddy with expectation. "I can't believe you're pregnant, Elizabeth, at your age and by that old coot Zechariah." "Oh, Mary, it's a miracle, and we've been told that our baby will be a great man, a prophet. But you, girl, I can't believe *you're* expecting! And here's what I've been sensing. I know it's crazy, because we're not royalty; we're nobody; but somehow I believe that your baby is actually the Promised One. And I'll tell you a secret: when I heard your voice this baby in me jumped for joy!"

I love that image, of the little unborn prophet John the Baptist, jumping up and down in utero. Elizabeth doesn't say "The baby kicked me." No, he jumped for joy. Does the coming of

the Messiah make you jump for joy? I watched the end of the Kentucky-Indiana basketball game last night. The lead went back and forth at the end, but Indiana hit a 3-pointer at the buzzer to upset the number one team in the nation, and the arena in Bloomington went wild. Everybody was jumping for joy. The Hoosier players, the fans in the stands—jumping up and down, running onto the floor, hugging everybody in sight. That’s something like the scene here, because the news that the Messiah is being born means that underdog Israel is going to knock of number one Rome. It means that the businessmen and corrupt judges and priests who are in cahoots with the empire will get their comeuppance, and the common people will finally get a fair deal. Just when we were about to give up hope, God hits a three pointer at the buzzer and wins the game.

When Mary breaks out in her very Jewish song, a pastiche of phrases from the Hebrew Scriptures, from Hannah’s song and from the psalms—she starts out on a personal note. “My soul—my deepest self—praises Yahweh, the God of Israel, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Why does Mary need a savior, a rescuer? It’s not at this point about being saved from sin or hell. There’s nothing about that in this song. She needs a rescuer because she is lowly, because her state is so humble, because she is at the bottom of the heap. She needs a rescuer because she is dirt poor and she is hungry. She needs to be rescued from the proud who think they are so great and from the rulers who hold all the power and from the rich who keep everything for themselves. And that is what she sees God doing when God sends the Messiah into the world. The Messiah, as everyone knows, will reestablish the world order with mercy and justice. That’s why Mary is so happy: “Joy to the world! The Lord is come! He rules the world with truth and grace! No more let sin and sorrow reign!”

Of course Mary *is* amazed that God has picked *her*. She is nobody. She is a peasant from a small town nobody ever heard of. She is part of the underclass. She has no education. The guests we had staying with us Friday night told us about a trip they made to Dollywood—Dolly Parton’s theme park in Tennessee—and how after that these liberal Massachusetts feminists read Dolly’s biography and were so impressed with her life. This place where Mary came from was the cultural equivalent of Appalachia, like Sevierville where Dolly grew up as one of twelve children in poverty, or like Butcher Holler where Loretta Lynn grew up as a coal miner’s daughter. When you’re growing up that way you can’t really believe that your life will ever amount to anything, and nobody expects much of you. You expect to be stuck just like everyone else and to live your life just getting by and never doing anything worth remembering.

And in Mary’s case it’s not that she has a dream for herself. God comes to her through an angel messenger and tells her that God’s Spirit will come over her and make her pregnant, and that she will be the mother of the Messiah, the Savior of her people, the one for whom the Jewish people have been waiting for centuries. And what she feels then is not just joy that she is pregnant, and not even just the joy that she has been picked to be part of God’s plan. The deepest source of joy is what this reveals about God. If God picks a poor girl from a place like Butcher Holler to be the mother of the Messiah, rather than picking a princess or a rich girl, it means that God is on our side. God is on the side of the poor.

There is no question that Mary begins to sing in the language of class warfare. That is, of course, the language of the prophets. That is the language of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament—and we are to understand that the Holy Spirit is inspiring Mary. But Mary sings about class warfare because then, as now, class warfare is not just a political device for dividing people; it is a historical reality. Mary knew that it was the proud, the rulers, and the rich who were the enemies of the poor and lowly. And the fact that God chose someone like her to be the mother of the Messiah meant that they were also the enemies of God. In picking Mary, God was

proving himself to be the God they had hoped for—one who would scatter the armies of the proud, pull the rulers down from their thrones, and send the rich away empty. God would lift up the humble and fill the hungry with good things. God would do away with the injustice of the political and economic system and bring justice for the poor. That's why she was so joyful! She was ready to jump up and down and sing not just because she was pregnant but because her pregnancy meant the coming of justice to this old wicked world.

This is nothing but the hope of Israel expressed over and over in the prophets—and in the psalms, and by the rabbis. But to modern ears it certainly sounds revolutionary. That's the word I saw repeatedly in the commentaries: revolutionary. That's not to say that Mary was a Marxist but that the hope that she had is similar in character to the hope that we see in Tahrir Square, the hope that we see in spite of tanks and killing in Syria, the hope that we saw in the streets of Moscow yesterday. It is the hope that yes, there *can* be justice.

When the politically liberal William Temple was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940's he still warned the British missionaries to India never ever to read the Magnificat in public, because the Indians already saw Christianity as a threat and this would only make them even more suspicious of what Christianity would mean to their social order. This is dangerous stuff! The song of Mary should be read at Occupy Providence. She is singing about the same stuff we are complaining about—except that she sees that God is already at work to bring justice. God is not on the side of the rich, the proud, and the powerful. God is on the side of the poor, the humble, and the powerless. God's kingdom, which was launched by Jesus and is still gaining steam in the world, is good news to the poor, as Jesus himself announced in his first public words.

God's kingdom—the kingdom which Jesus the Messiah brings with him into the world—is a kingdom where the poor are blessed and the rich are warned that everything they have is passing away. When the early followers of Jesus in the book of Acts tried to live out that kingdom in their life together, the ones who were rich sold what they had and shared it with those who were poor. The apostle Paul said when he asked for gifts for the poor in the church that the goal is *equality*. The goal in the church should be economic equality among the rich and the poor, so that no one would have too much and no one would have too little. That arch-conservative Paul said that. 2 Corinthians 8:13-15—check it out! The growing gap between the haves and the have-nots is the opposite of what God wants, and the coming of the Messiah means that God is going to bring justice.

In some ways this song that Mary sings is the overture to the gospel of Luke, because the theme of God's mercy toward the poor and his judgment on the rich runs all through the gospel. Not only are there Jesus' declarations like "Blessed are you poor" and "Woe to you rich," but all those familiar stories: the rich man who cannot follow Jesus because he has many possessions, the rich fool who builds bigger barns and is told that it's time to die, the rich man who neglects the beggar on his doorstep and finds himself in hell. Then there is the one rich man who is saved—little Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who when he meets Jesus not only pays back everyone he has defrauded but gives half his money to the poor—and Jesus says, "See, salvation has come to this house today!" The rich can be transformed. They can be saved by God's power—nothing is impossible for God. But they are saved when they choose to serve God rather than Money as their master. Mary prefigures all that stuff in her song before Jesus was born, making you wonder if she was the one who taught little Jesus about social justice as he was growing up.

For Mary, the main reason for joy was that justice was coming. You know, I still consider myself an evangelical. I believe that Jesus came, as Matthew says, to save his people from their

sin. I believe in personal salvation. But I also believe with Luke that Jesus came to bring justice to this world, to bring together rich and poor in one body, one people, to reconcile Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, so that there would be no distinction in rank. And Jesus is always the enemy of the rich who oppress the poor, of employers who mistreat their workers, of people who look down on women. His coming is not good news for those who profit at the expense of others; his coming means judgment is on its way.

When we think of Christmas joy, let us not limit it to joy in trees and lights and presents and food. Let us not even limit it to the joys of family and Christian fellowship. When we think of Christmas joy, let us think of rejoicing in justice. In joy, let us pay attention to the lowly as God does. In joy, let us debunk the imagination of the proud rather than sucking up to them. In joy, let us make sure that the hungry get everything they need and the rich do not get too much. The Messiah's coming is certain. His kingdom is forever. God will act—has already acted—to make everything right.