

Luke 1:46b-55

Joy Can't Wait

December 15, 2019

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

On Thursday morning, some of the women from our church, First Christian Nowata, and First Christian Bartlesville gathered for a Christmas brunch. After we ate, Rev. Susan Payne, the transitional minister of First Christian Bartlesville, shared with us some of the history behind several beloved Christmas carols. After hearing about how the carols came to be, we sang them, paying attention to the lyrics and the story they tell. Afterward, when I was on my way back to my office, I wondered why Susan chose the carols she did from among the many possibilities. I wondered if one of them was her favorite. I took a few moments to contemplate which carols are my favorites and what stories they tell.

How about you? What are your favorite Christmas carols?

This year is a bit of a carol milestone in that we celebrate the 300th anniversary of "Joy to the World," one of my favorites. The song is the result of the efforts of three men, Isaac Watts, George Frederick Handel and Lowell Mason. The story about how it came to be goes like this:

In 1719, Isaac Watts, already a notable scholar and author, sat down under a tree at the Abney Estate near London and began to compose some poetry based on Psalm 98, which says, in part:

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

⁵ Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.

⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.

⁸ Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy

⁹ at the presence of the Lord...”

Separately, in 1741, George Frederick Handel, who was already famous as a composer, set out to do something big. After spending several hours in prayer, he worked for just 23 days writing his now famous “Messiah,” one of the greatest of all sacred classics. Handel’s name alone drew such a crowd that, at the premier of “Messiah,” in Dublin, audience members were advised to leave their hoop skirts and swords at home for fear of overcrowding.

And then, almost a century later, Lowell Mason found Watts’ Psalm 98-based poem of joy and wanted to publish it. There was only one problem - he didn’t have a proper musical setting. In his search, he came upon a beautiful melody in Handel’s “Messiah.” So, Mason set Watts’ poem to Handel’s music and created “Joy to the World.” It is, indeed, one of the most sung and recorded Christmas carols.

God’s people have been singing about their understanding and experiences of God for a very long time. Today’s text is a beautiful example of that. The Magnificat is one of the most famous passages in the New Testament. The author of Luke set Mary’s song within the context of her visit with her cousin Elizabeth. Both women were, as beloved church member Dorothy Welch would say, “in a family way.” When the women greeted one another, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb, who would be named John, leaped; Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, both in affirmation of Mary and in recognition of the importance of the baby Mary was carrying. Mary responds, this is Luke 1:46-55:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Mary's Song, which most scholars believe is in the tradition of the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, is one of a number of songs or poems in the Bible in which biblical writers, who were men, gave important voice to women. Women like Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, and Mary, whose songs are part of the biblical narrative at important turning points in the history of Israel and Judah. The author of Luke uses Mary's song to interpret the narrative theologically. In other words, it tells us what Jesus had come to do.

Mary's song is set within the context of Roman occupation, colonization, and oppression of Israel. In keeping with the tradition of the words on the mouths of her role models, it is a song of liberation. There are two ways to look at these texts, on one hand, the songs (and the stories they represent) are odes to the men and the "male" God who empowers patriarchy. On the other hand, they function to reinforce the important social role of women as mothers and

comforters within the patriarchal order in which they lived. And let us not forget...the voices of these women have endured, which, all things considered, is quite something!

Mary's song is a song of reversals, reversals like in the way in which we see Mary. She is first a lowly peasant girl, living in an economically poor and militarily occupied land...in the narrative, she *becomes* the bearer of God. I can't help but wonder what would change if we could see ourselves, like Mary, as "God-bearers," as the ones through whom the world will know God. Would that reversal move the world closer to the prophetic vision of shalom we've been talking about? Maybe if we understood ourselves as representatives of God's image we, like Mary, would sing a new song, an unexpected song of joy in the midst of life that, frankly, seems a stark contrast.

Mary's song reminds us that joy can't wait.

And why should it? The stories of Christmas are not just old stories from the ancient past about something that happened "in the olden days." And they are not only stories of a vision for a future, like in Isaiah, that we may never see. The stories are about what's happening right now as well. In their book, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth*, scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg tell this story from Borg's childhood:

"He is six or seven years old, at home with his mother in the days around Christmas. He sings the familiar Christmas hymn, 'Joy to the World,' he sings the second line, 'The Lord has come.' His mother gently corrects him. She says, 'No---the words aren't, the Lord *has* come. The words are, the Lord *is* come.' At the time, he was puzzled. Surely, he thought, Christmas is about the coming of Jesus a long time ago, indeed two thousand years ago: he has come. Years later, he realized that his mother and the words of the hymn are right. Christmas is about the coming in the present of the Lord who came long ago in the past. Jesus comes again each Christmas."

God is revealed again and again any time the world is turned upside-down. When the ones who rely on their own intelligence and means are reminded that we cannot tame the Mystery of the Holy, God is revealed.

God is revealed when the ones who wield the world's power are face to face with the ones who have lived the consequences of the abuses of power. God is revealed in full bellies and lives changed as a result of compassion, justice, and mercy. God is revealed when joy is acknowledged, even when life is not what we hoped or expected. Joy can't wait.

I mentioned in the sermon the first Sunday of Advent that this year, more than other years I recall, I've heard from folks a reluctance to engage in the merriment of the season. There is a sense that there is a lot going on in the world that isn't cause for celebration, so our talk of Advent themes like hope, peace, love, and especially joy, seem tone deaf. But here is what I think. Our neighbors who are grieving, searching, angry, frustrated, and lonely need us to resist our tendency to dwell on all that is wrong and act as if we believe that the Lord *is* come. You see, joy is its own kind of resistance. I thought last week as we dedicated sweet Ian, "Take this darkness...we are repairing the world, one moment of joy at a time." And we have to keep doing that.

I was tired Wednesday as I bustled around the church kitchen, getting ready for the Family Promise Graduates Christmas Party. I was making chili...I hate to cook, but I was doing it anyway. What I really wanted to be doing was sitting at home by the fireplace in my fuzzy pajamas, reading a book. I was not feeling particularly festive. But then it happened.

Seven families who have completed the Family Promise program trickled in the doors. The children burst in saying, "I remember staying here." And best of all, "I remember you...you're the pastor!" I

remembered them...every one of them. The children had grown and, in so many ways, their parents had too. They talked about their homes, schools, and their jobs. One of the moms had just picked up her first car. She was terrified and elated!

The next thing I knew, I was filled with joy, which believe me, I had no intention of feeling. Mary Oliver wrote a poem about what to do in these situations:

“If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don’t hesitate.

Give in to it.

There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.

We are not wise, and not very often kind.

And much can never be redeemed.

Still, life has some possibility left.

Perhaps this is its way of fighting back,

that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world.

It could be anything,

but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins.

Anyway, that’s often the case.

Anyway, whatever it is, don’t be afraid of its plenty.

Joy is not made to be a crumb.”

Joy can’t wait.

We cannot allow joy, like that present in the Fellowship Hall Wednesday night, to be diminished by the imperfect world in which we live. And joy cannot wait for the world to change. In fact, it is joy that will help change the world. The unexpected joy I experienced this week reminded me, once again, that what we do in this place, in our lives, matters. We are the bearers of God in this world. And while it may seem counterintuitive to proclaim joy to the world, do it anyway.

Joy is resistance. The Lord *is* come today and every day.

Joy can’t wait.