

## ***Humble Joy***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on the Third Sunday in Advent  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

December 11, 2016

Texts: Luke 1:46-55

So, when would you say the last time was that you experienced “joy?” That’s a serious question! When was the last time you felt joyful? What was it that prompted joy in you? (*pause*) I ask because I think joy is a pretty rare emotion, even though we tend to think of it as a routine one. That’s because I think we confuse a bunch of other emotions with joy – like happiness, gladness, even silliness or playfulness. But joy, true joy – that unbounded sense of overwhelming wonderfulness that explodes from the center of your being – that’s pretty rare.

Yet, how many Christmas card and wrapping paper designs are built on the word “joy?” Quite a few. And what about those “word” plaques folks have out for decoration this time of year – “JOY” in big, red, block letters, maybe even with a little gold trim. And what about those “JOY” light up signs on lawns and in windows. But are these people really joyful? Is there really joy in their homes and in their lives? Would they know it if there was or would they miss it because they were so busy looking for something else – money, success, power, popularity?

Joy. How would you define it? My old Webster’s dictionary at home defines joy as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success

or good fortune OR by the prospect of possessing what one desires: Delight.” A second definition offered describes joy as a state of happiness or felicity: Bliss.” Webster’s also suggests pleasure as an acceptable synonym for joy. All due respects to Mr. Webster, but I could not disagree more with pleasure as a synonym for joy. Pleasure is just way too bland to describe joy. Enjoying a hot cup of really good coffee is a pleasure. Savoring the creamy cold deliciousness of the best chocolate ice cream cone ever on a super hot day is a joy. See the difference?

As you have no doubt realized by now, joy is the Advent theme we are exploring together this morning. Joy alternates its positioning within the Advent quadrilateral equation (the other points of which are hope, peace and love) sometimes falling third and sometimes fourth. Where it falls is usually determined by which Advent Wreath liturgy is followed, and ours this year, from the Upper Room Devotional books we have available here at the church, places joy on the third Sunday. And here we are. You wouldn’t think it would matter that much, and in many respects it doesn’t. Until, of course, the preacher –that would be me – looks at the biblical texts suggested for the Third Sunday of Advent in the Lectionary and realizes the Gospel text from Luke does not even contain the word “joy.”

Well, technically, that’s not true. It is in the sentences just before the text we read this morning. These verses from Luke,

known as the Magnificat, are the words Mary offers in response to the extraordinary greeting she receives from her cousin Elisabeth whom she has just come to visit. Mary has already had her little encounter with the angel who told her she was to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. After she and the angel chat a bit about this extraordinary bit of news, Mary decides to go and see Elisabeth because the angel told her that Elisabeth who had been barren was also now with child. When Mary arrives at Elisabeth's and greets her, Elisabeth says, "as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting the child in my womb leaped for *joy*." Elisabeth also offers Mary a beautiful blessing in this moment, one I'm sure must have felt wonderful to the frightened young girl. Elisabeth said, "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Good for you for trusting that the angel spoke God's truth to you, she said to Mary. And then Mary responded with this morning's text.

These beautiful words attributed to Mary are simply extraordinary in so many ways, not the least of which is that they are attributed to an illiterate, teenage unwed mother. But in her reality resides their true power! Mary is describing something simply extraordinary – the complete reversal of what she knows to be the reality of the world in which she lives. Everything is changing she says, because of what God is accomplishing through her and the baby she will bear: the proud will be scattered, lost in

their own thoughts. The powerful will lose their positions of authority while those at the bottom will be lifted up. Those always hungry will be fed and those with so much will be sent away with nothing. Everything will change because of this baby, Mary is singing. And how blessed is she to be the one chosen to be this child's mother. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

God doesn't care how poor I am, Mary says. God doesn't care that the rest of the society looks at me as disgraced because I'm not married and yet carrying this child. God doesn't care that I'm young and inexperienced. God only cares that I have always done my best to love and trust God fully. God only cares that when the angel presented God's plan to me, I trusted God enough to say yes. God chose me, the humblest of people. I am a living miracle, Mary sings in these beautiful words. It is important to hold on to Mary as we consider these beautiful words! Mary, the person speaking, is what gives the words their power. I am nothing, she says, and yet God chose me. God is changing everything and God chose me to make it happen.

An extraordinary scene! An extraordinary situation! One I am confident none of us would want to be faced with. Who would want to be the person chosen to upend everything? Who would want to be the person to name all the problems crushing everyone

as something God is going to use you to fix? Who would receive this assignment from God's own self and respond with "my soul magnifies the Lord" instead of "uh, ... no thanks?" Well, the person ready to be the mother of the Christ Child, that's who. Mary, a simple peasant girl with a deep and abiding faith willing to take God at God's word, that's who. Mary receives the news about this extraordinary new role in life with what can only be described as humble joy. She knows she isn't worthy of the great gift God is giving her and yet she accepts it with joy. She trusts that God sees something very special in her, and only in her, and she agrees to accept God's vision for her as her own.

Mary's story is one we often gloss over because the woman Mary has been lost as the reverence for her as "the mother of the Christ" has increased over the millennia. Paintings depict her as angelic, serenely indifferent to whatever is happening in the chosen scene. Music throughout the centuries sings of her as everything from the queen of heaven to the weeping woman at the foot of the cross. She is the subject of folklore around the world and who hasn't heard of all the Marian apparitions like Medjugore, Lodes, Fatima and others. Mary is larger than life to us. She is ... well, Mary! The Catholic Church portrays her as the perfect woman – perfectly obedient to God and her earthly husband, perfectly wonderful in her role as the mother of the infant and child Jesus, perfectly loyal to her son the Messiah,

dying on the cross. Mary has become this larger than life replica of perfect womanhood and that's too bad. It's too bad because we've lost the Mary that attracted God's attention. We've lost the faithful, trusting young woman God realized was the only woman God trusted with his own son. We've lost so much of what really matters about Mary when we put her up on that pedestal where she never wanted or expected to be. Mary never wanted or expected to be special. Mary never wanted to be anything but a faithful follower of the God she loved and trusted. And therein lies her real power, her real truth for us.

This Mary is who we see and hear in the Magnificat. This person knows what it is to be disrespected and downtrodden just for being who she was – a poor Jewish peasant girl in a remote outpost of the Roman Empire. Her words tell us she knew what it was to be hungry when others had so much more than they needed. She knew what it was to be frightened that others might judge her unfavorably and even try to hurt her because she was having a baby out of wedlock. In her beautiful words we realize she knew what it was to reach rock bottom and know that the only way forward is to put all your trust, all your hope, in the promises of God. She knew, to the core of who she was, that just as the angel had promised her, all things were possible with God.

Dear friends, Mary dared to be joyful when she should have been afraid. She dared to be hopeful in a world where hope was a

foolish luxury. Mary dared to be the person God invited her to be – the mother of God’s own son, God’s own self coming to experience the fullness of what it meant to be human – and everything changed because of her faith and her decision to say yes. Mary dared to be what her world told her not to be – a strong, powerful, positive woman willing to be and to do whatever God needed her to do. And that is her gift to us, still. Did an illiterate young girl really say the words of this beautiful poem as Luke records them? Sounds like a stretch, doesn’t it. Well, I don’t know if she said these exact words in this moment or not. But I do know that the people who knew her throughout her life as Jesus’ mother knew these words were her truth. She lived them every day of her life. Humble joy was who she was – always joyful because of the great gift God gave her in the incredible challenge of being the mother of God’s own son. Always humble because she never forgot who she was or where she came from. Always surprised that God had chosen her for this incredible task.

So what does the Mary of the Magnificat have to say to us this morning, 2000 years after the baby she was so joyful to bear was born, lived and died only to rise again? Several things, I think. First and foremost, she would say, “don’t put me on a pedestal. I don’t belong there. No one does. All I did was say yes to God because I trusted God’s plan for me life.” Then, she would say, “always pause long enough for joy. Don’t be worn down by

the problems and challenges in your life that feel overwhelming. Don't give in to sadness or hopelessness or fear. Life is too precious for that. Always be ready to let joy burst into your life because that's the only way it's able to." Mary would tell us, "be ready to listen to God's plan for you and ask for God's strength to respond as God needs you too. Look for where you can make a difference and pitch in. Some people are mean and uncaring, feeling like they are so much better than other people. Don't be like them. Resist the temptations of power and money. Instead, look for the people who are hurting and help them. Feed the hungry, comfort the sick, house the homeless, welcome the stranger in your midst.

Most of all I think Mary would tell us to be always watchful for God breaking out in your life in surprising and unexpected places. Never assume that God won't ask you to do something impossible because that tends to be exactly what God does ask of you, of any one of us. But you have to be listening for God in your life to hear God's invitation to action, whatever that might mean for you. Whatever it is God needs you to do, big or small, Mary would advise you this one thing – to receive God's gift of confidence in you with humility and joy. Humble joy is, after all, your gift to God, to all those you love, and to yourself. How amazing is that? Amen.