



NORTHMINSTER CHURCH

DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK
HUMBLY WITH GOD. MICAH 6:8

Joy and Liberation

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Claire Helton

December 15, 2019

Luke 1:46b-55

*My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,
and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.*

*For you have looked with favor
upon your lowly servant,
and from this day forward
all generations will call me blessed.*

*For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me,
and holy is your Name.*

*Your mercy reaches from age to age
for those who fear you.*

*You have shown strength with your arm;
you have scattered the proud in their conceit;
you have deposed the mighty from their thrones
and raised the lowly to high places.*

*You have filled the hungry with good things,
while you have sent the rich away empty.*

*You have come to the aid of Israel your servant,
mindful of your mercy –
the promise you made to our ancestors –
to Sarah and Abraham
and their descendants forever.*

When Mary sang, do you think she also danced? Do you think she could even help it? When your soul cries out it's bound to make use of more than just your vocal cords. Did her body enact the deep truth her spirit was sensing, this truth about the nature of the God she worshiped? Do you think her feet moved in time with the rhythm of her hope? Do you think her newly formed baby bump swayed to the cadence of her joy?

Mary had known what we might call a provincial life. As much as scholars dispute many of the details we were taught in Sunday School about Jesus' life, no one disputes that he was born in the town of Nazareth. And what we know of Nazareth leads us to believe it was nothing like the booming metropolis of Monroe, Louisiana. Archaeologists have found evidence of a "town" (that's a strong word) encompassing roughly ten square acres, probably home to no more than four hundred souls. They haven't even been able to find anything that would suggest that there was enough of a town to warrant a large, public building like the synagogue Jesus preaches at in Luke 4, just a few chapters later. In other words, Nazareth was a small town – of no account to nobody. It's no wonder that when Nathanael, the disciple, was asked to come and hear Jesus for the first time his response was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

And so, Mary is a country girl living in Caesar's world. When she sings her song about God deposing the mighty from their thrones I suppose there's a chance she was looking back into the history of her people – but the last time that happened, it was their king being deposed, and the ones being scattered were her own ancestors. It seems more likely that she is singing here about her hope of God's impending deliverance of her nation out of the conquering, crushing grasp of the Roman empire. This would fit with the tone of Luke's gospel overall, the gospel which – more than any of the others – emphasizes the very physical, very present implications of Jesus' message as one of hope for those on the margins, of mercy for those who have been oppressed. And so Mary sings of a God who, with strength, scatters the proud, bringing them down a peg; a God whose justice cannot abide forever the rule of an overbearing tyrant; a God who lifts up the lowly, the poor, the hungry, and fills them with good things. She sings out with joy; she sings out in the hope of liberation.

Of course, she never got it – not in the way she had hoped. When Luke's gospel is written down fifty years after Jesus has come and gone, the people of Israel have been thrown yet again into a national existential crisis, Jerusalem and its Temple lying in ruins for a second time. I wonder how long Mary lived after Jesus, if she sensed in her later years that the oppressive empire she

had so fervently prayed for God to overturn was, instead, growing more and more oppressive by the day. When the Roman soldiers stormed the Temple, certainly Mary had died and Jesus was long gone, but were her other children still living? Did her grandchildren join the Jewish revolt?

I wonder about these questions because I'm wrestling with a tension. Mary's prayers for basic needs – for enough food to go around, for dignity for the poor, for a government that would not exploit her people – on the whole those prayers were not met. The tension comes from knowing that and trying to come to terms with it, *while also* hoping against hope that despite those very physical realities, given the life that she lived and the life that she bore and witnessed in Jesus, that she was, perhaps, still able to find joy.

In the reflection Zach read for us earlier in the service, Eckhart Tolle writes about the fundamental principle that sages throughout the centuries and across cultures and religions have observed again and again to be true: that joy does not come from out there, outside of ourselves. We can derive *happiness* from people, from experiences, from a good conversation, even from whatever consumeristic stocking stuffers Santa has left us on Christmas morning. But the iPad that's new and shiny in December 2019 is going to malfunction sometime in 2021 – or if you're lucky, a few years later – and what once brought you pleasure is now going to bring you pain, or at least frustration. And while we may be able to accept this as just an irritating reality of the tech industry, there are deeper levels of truth here. The usual antidote that's offered to the poison of finding our happiness in "things" is to turn, instead, toward relationships, toward other people. How many Christmas movies have been made about letting go of the need to find fulfillment in "stuff" and to find it instead in the people we love? The Lifetime channel gets a *lot* of things wrong, but there is truth in the idea that we can find more fulfillment in relationships than we can in all the material things money can buy. But I want to push us even a step further than that.

The next thing I'm going to say is, "As Zach and I were watching the *Watchmen* series," and I want to preface before I say that. I for some reason find myself wishing I weren't the kind of person who had seen more of the over-abundance of superhero movies in the last couple of decades than not, and I put off watching the new *Watchmen* series with Zach for as long as I could because of that self-stereotyping I've been doing, but I'm going to leave that to discuss with my therapist; I am what I am and I've seen what I've seen. If you're not a superhero person, just take my word for it, this one isn't really about the capes or the super strength as much as it is about humanity.

So, as Zach and I were watching the *Watchmen* series on HBO last week, there was a scene about a character who knows – for reasons I won't reveal – that a certain relationship is going to end in tragedy. This character is speaking with a woman, trying to convince her that it's still a valuable thing to begin the relationship in the first place, even if she knows from the outset that it's going to end badly. "Why would I do that?" she asks. He responds, "By definition, don't all relationships end in tragedy?"

It rubbed me the wrong way when he said it, but he's not wrong. Even in the best of circumstances, our parents, our friends, our partners, sometimes even our children will leave us, or will be forced to watch us leave them, whether death takes us or the fracturing of relationship, whether it's slow and offset by the passage of time or abrupt and jarring and surreal. We *can* place our hope of fulfillment, of joy, in those relationships that mean the most to us, *but* when we do that, if we're honest, we are only staving off the inevitable. Where will joy come from when the relationship is gone?

I'm not trying to send anyone into a depression here, but I do want us to be honest. False joy will do us about as much good as a false peace, as false hope. It's true joy that we're after. And from Eckhart Tolle to Richard Rohr, to the Buddha, to Jesus of Nazareth, the consensus seems to be that true joy is already here. You already have it. The kingdom of God in all its fullness, in all that it represents, in all its glory, is within you. You are, already, the light of the world.

Nothing can *give* you joy; joy is uncaused. It arises from within as the joy of simply being. Call it the joy of the Lord. Call it inner peace. Call it acceptance, or presence, call it being here now.

I pray that all of your relationships – and all of mine – are thriving and healthy until our dying breaths. But even if they’re not and things fall apart, and even if it turns out you’re not the one who goes first, my deeper prayer is that still, you will know where to turn to find joy. Or rather, that you will know, you don’t have to turn anywhere to find joy. Joy does not arrive from our circumstances, it arises from within, when we are most fully present to what is.

This is where my wondering about Mary inevitably leads me. I wonder if, through watching her son, through a lifetime of listening to him, she ever learned to sing a different song, a song reconciling her outward circumstances with a sense of acceptance and peace in the present, a song reconciling her citizenship in an oppressed nation with the joy of simply being.

And if she did, does that mean we ought to stop singing songs of liberation like the Magnificat? Was Mary naïve? (I mean, she was only like twelve so probably.) Mary’s song rejoiced that the world was about to turn, and it was, in holy and wholly-encompassing ways. But the reason her song still speaks to us today is because it still rings so true, because it still speaks to a need that has not yet been fulfilled.

So, where does that leave us? If the thing that gives life is to find joy in what is, in Being, no matter the circumstances; and if the thing that sucks our life away is to believe that we will only find joy in our circumstances, or in the hope of how they might one day change, then it seems that the gift we seek is the ability to have that hope that things will get better, *and* to be content even if they don’t. It’s to have a reason to work furiously in the struggle for liberation, for peace, *and* to know peace inside yourself even when the world continues to fall apart.

In truth, I don't know that Mary could have sung the song that she did, I don't know that her exuberance could have been transmitted down through the ages so potently, if the joy it communicated relied on the outcome of her prayers. I don't think that kind of a song would move us. Rather, it is because Mary's song is grounded in the *kind* of God she worships, the kinds of things God does, rather than in the hope of God doing any one specific thing, that her song has carried so many forward for so long. This is the joy of the Lord: to be, in the presence of the One, the great Being from whom all our beings proceed.

Joy is found in our acceptance of the present moment. Liberation for the oppressed is found in our continued struggle against the status quo. These things are both true. It would be difficult to sing a Magnificat if you felt you were caught in the tension between these two realities, hemming and hawing over whether you should focus more on cultivating inner contentment or on pursuing outward change. Caught in the tension is no joyful place to be. But I wonder, church, if we might instead find our way – not to get caught – but to dance in that tension? What might it look like to embrace the hope that the world is about to turn, and to do it from a place of deep peace – timing the steps in our dance of joy in the now to the drumbeat of hope for tomorrow?