

December 8, 2019
Rev. Kerry Smith

Luke 1:46-55 Make His Blessings Known: Unabashed Joy
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 1:46-55 New Revised Standard Version, adapted

Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in you, O God, my Savior, for you have looked with favor on the lowliness of your servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for you, the Mighty One, have done great things for me, and holy is your name. Your mercy is for those who honor you from generation to generation. You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. You have brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; you have filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. You have helped your servant Israel, in remembrance of your mercy, according to the promise you made to our ancestors, to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever."

Kristin Mallory and I have the great joy of leading Preschool Chapel on Wednesday mornings for the kids at Greenland Hills Preschool. As we teach the kids about Christmas we tell them when the angel told Mary she was going to have the baby Jesus, Mary was very happy. I have the kids make a face like they think Mary made, but then I ask if they think she was feeling anything else. Usually there is at least one person that says that Mary was probably afraid.

Mary was probably around fourteen years old, engaged to a man, getting ready to leave her parents' house for his house. But next thing she knew, an angel appears and says if Mary agrees she will give birth to a baby, God's baby. Mary agrees, and then she is alone, but she wasn't alone because there was life growing inside of her. I think Mary was very afraid.

The angel had told Mary her cousin Elizabeth was also impossibly pregnant, so Mary got out of her parents' house as quickly as she could and headed to the one safe place she could think of, her cousin Elizabeth's house. She went as fast as she could, afraid and overwhelmed. When Mary sees Elizabeth's face and her six month pregnant belly, Elizabeth feels her child do a dance of joy in her belly. Elizabeth sings out to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, my Mary. And blessed is that God-baby growing in your body."

I doubt that Mary had thought of herself like that. She had not thought of this as a blessing. Then Elizabeth makes the first confession of faith about the Christ in the Gospel of Luke. "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Mary was reminded of the angel's first words to her. "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you." The first thing the angel did was remind Mary that she was a blessing, that God was with her. Mary had been so consumed with the questions, how would she explain this, what did this mean, why was this happening? She had forgotten the angel telling her God claimed her. She was young, unmarried, poor, living in an occupied land, terrified, and God had chosen her.

Mary realized her true identity had nothing to do with her age or where she was in life. Her sole identity was as a child of God. God's blessing and claim embraced her. And nothing, not fear, not poverty, not violence, not the powerful, not any mistakes she would make, not rumors as her belly grew, nothing could take away that identity as God's beloved child from Mary or from any of us. Mary was blessed by God, called favored one, pregnant with God's miracle. She knew that God was with her, no matter what happened next. She was filled with joy and she couldn't keep from singing. Mary sings this song of praise for all God had done, was doing, and would do.

The Message translates Mary's words as, "I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one good look at me, and look what happened— I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten." Joy doesn't wait for struggle to be over. Joy finds a way to bubble up in Mary even though what has happened will put her in a position of dishonor among her people. She is in this posture of joy singing out

powerfully because she knows that justice for the oppressed and freedom for the captive is coming.

Mary's words are known as the Magnificat, which is Latin for "my soul magnifies the Lord." Every one in Luke's Gospel is singing, Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, the angels, and Simeon who meets Mary, Joseph and Jesus in the temple. Mary doesn't just sing a song for herself. She sings a song of praise, a song of revolution, for all who would benefit from God's actions. She sings in hope for light to overcome darkness, for the rich one day to help the poor, for the rulers to use their power to help, not hurt. She praised God for removing kings from their thrones, for elevating and dignifying the lowly ones, for filling the hungry, and for taking away the purchasing power of the rich.

She sings for everyone who has ever felt forgotten by God. She reminds them of God's promise of justice for all people, God's promise to be with them forever, God's promise to walk with them in darkness and in light, God's promise to dry every tear. It is easy for us to let go of the hopes and dreams we have as people and a community when it feels like the darkness won't stop. There is tragedy, racial injustice, violence, bigotry, politics that seem to thrive on greed. We sing to find hope. We sing to be reminded that in the darkness there is always light. We sing to remind ourselves that those with scars are healers. We sing to remind ourselves of the vision of hope where the wrongs of history will be made right.

I listened to a Think podcast from KERA that Mallory Smith sent to me. The Associate Pastor at Wilshire Baptist has written a book about that church's journey to inclusion for all people. He said that Wilshire didn't get it right during the AIDS epidemic. There was a mom at the church at that time who was HIV positive because of a blood transfusion. Her child was not allowed to come to Sunday School. The Associate Pastor said they didn't get it right then, but they got it right now.

Sometimes we need something to happen to disrupt the status quo and bring peace. We need a church that we have been a part of our entire lives, in my case, the United Methodist Church, to fall apart so that it can be rebuilt into a church that embraces all, includes all. Sometimes we have to look around at all of the chaos and no longer be afraid. We need to look into the future and see a time when people will be fed and feed others; when families will be welcomed and celebrated at our borders instead of torn apart; when people will receive equity and bring equality to others; and when there will be reformation to our criminal justice system.

Mary was filled with such joy that she sang a song of revolution for the way that God was breaking out into the world through her and through the child Jesus she carried. She was not filled with shame. She was filled with hope and unabashed joy even though she had every reason to give up and hide in fear. She sang until all her joy and praise had filled her with a deep sense of peace, holy presence, and courage.

As the generations have passed, Mary's revolutionary praise song has been sung by people anytime they feel overwhelmed by fear. It has been sung by people who felt too ordinary, too poor, too low to count for anything or anybody. And each time it is sung, we remember that God blesses us, God claims us, God promises to grow new life in us. Henri Nouwen said, "We claim that God is a God of life, even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in one another. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment – that is the meaning of community and the Christian life."

I love playing handbells. We practice and practice and then we have one opportunity to play it the best that we can. And we never get it perfect. But, that's why I love it. I have to pay attention and count 1, 2, 3, 4 and every single time I get lost, I mess up, but I have to keep

playing because everyone else in the handbell choir is depending on me. If I stop playing, if I give up, then Carol and my mom will get lost. When we do a run when Carol plays and then I play and then my mom plays, they will mess up if I don't play. We all need to do our part so that it sounds like the music it was meant to be. This church is like that. We all have a crucial part to play so that it all comes out bursting with love.

I have spent this week getting ready for y'all to hopefully come to my house for the Open House from 1-3 pm. When we were putting activities on the church calendar a few months ago, December 8 sounded like a great idea because I would have to have my Christmas decorations up. Well, this week as I have been running around I thought it was a terrible idea! But, as I put our Christmas tree up, I remembered that one of the light strings blinks. None of the other strings blink, just one. Some people would throw it away and get new lights. I kind of love it. It reminds me that I'm not perfect. My tree isn't perfect. But, that one string is going to keep on blinking. It isn't giving up hope. It is going to continue to be a light in the darkness, no matter what!

Mary's words call to each one of us and to this church to bring healing to our community. To sing joy unabashedly, to bring hope to the hopeless and light in the darkness. May we burst into song singing, "My soul magnifies the Lord!"