A Burst of Pure Joy

LUKE 1:46-50 (NRSV) ***And Mary said,***
"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.

MATTHEW 2:16-18 (NRSV) ***When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:***
18 "A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

There are two voices in the texts for this morning. The first comes from the hill country of Judea. The voice is that of Mary; a poor teenager from a small town; pregnant and unwed, in a culture in which such a situation *could* be grounds for the death penalty. It comes, even though Mary is confused, in response to a strange visit from one who called himself an angel.

Mary is packed off to a cousin in another town—an old woman—married to a preacher. Imagine her expectations: suffocating supervision; strict curfews; daily lectures on morality—lectures spiced with clever, original expressions like, "...you reap what you sew." "...when you give a dance you gotta' pay the band."

But, to her amazement, none of her expectations come true! Instead of a dowdy old grump, cousin Elizabeth laughs, and claps her hands—and has a girlish twinkle in her eyes that contradicts the wrinkles that surround them. Instead of a cold slap on the wrist she greets Mary with warm embraces! Instead of lectures about moral responsibility, there is joy over her pregnancy.

The reason quickly becomes evident, for Elizabeth also carries a child within her—even at her age. And there's even more: Elizabeth, also, had an angel visitor.

Had it been just a dream—a hallucination born out of intense Jewish longing for freedom and wholeness after six centuries of hoping and waiting—600 Passovers without fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah?

But here is confirmation: another whom she honors and respects has received the same word: "The Redeemer is near!" And Mary not only will see it; she actually will give birth to Messiah! And so, Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord!"

The second voice comes from Ramah: "the voice of Rachel, weeping for her children; and she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."

With this voice comes images of Herod raving in his palace; Roman soldiers riding through the streets, knocking down doors, running down women in back alleys;

women screaming and desperately clutching their children...

Why did the spirit that inspired Holy Scripture include this event in the story of the birth of Jesus? Couldn't it have been left out? What does it add? Isn't Christmas a time of joy and celebration? I believe God is one who celebrates and rejoices! I believe creation and all of nature affirms it.

Consider the stars—those cosmic fireworks spangling the black velvet of night; not flung randomly into space like a boy rolling marbles across a hardwood floor, but set into a motion that holds each star and planet in orbit; timed so at just the right moment in history the right star reached the right place and joined the heavenly choir in celebration of the birth of God's Son.

And there's the heavenly choir itself: it's mentioned only twice in the scriptures. At the birth of God's Son they sang "Glory to God in the Highest!" and they're already rehearsing the anthem to be sung at the marriage of God's Son: "Hallelujah! For the Lord, God, omnipotent reigns!"

The Kingdom of God is a place of joy!

Remember the "Kingdom Parables" of Jesus? A woman lost a coin, and cleaned places in her home that hadn't been seen in ages, until she found the coin. Then she called her neighbors and threw a party! The party probably cost more than the coin! Jesus said the Kingdom is like that.

A shepherd counts his sheep at the close of day and one is missing. He searches until he finds the sheep. Back home he calls his neighbors and throws a party. Probably served mutton! Jesus said the Kingdom is like that: a place of celebration.

But our joy sometimes, even at Christmas, is marred by the voice from Ramah. I heard it again this week: that same old familiar dirge: "They've taken Christ out of Christmas!"

I said, "But Christ will be in your Christmas, if you want him there! 'They' can't take him out of your Christmas! The lights and the advertising don't have to be commercial to you; they can be for you a celebration of the coming of Christ."

But she was adamant: "No; man made the tinsel; God made the straw."

Maybe we're just not meant to be happy all the time. The wisdom of the ages says, "Everything good is balanced by something bad. You know the cliches:

"You've got to take the bitter with the sweet."

"Into every life some rain must fall."

And who can forget the immortal words of the blessed sage, Erma Bombeck: *"If life is just a bowl of cherries, why am I always 'in the pits'?"*

The pain and suffering in the world are real. We can't pick up a newspaper or

turn on the T.V.—or Facebook—without being reminded. A part of the church's on-going ministry is helping the poor; and, didn't Jesus say, "The poor will always be with you?" And yet, Jesus made that statement in defense of an act of extravagance!

And in our text this morning is Mary: life filled with poverty, injustice, constant oppression, and fear—in the midst of personal circumstances that could *not* have been good—teenaged, pregnant, and unwed—with *"A Burst of Pure Joy!"*

Why is it so difficult for *us* to let go, even momentarily, and experience joy—pure joy—JUST FOR THE SAKE OF JOY?

Maybe it's theological reasons. Maybe our view of God doesn't allow pure joy. A vindictive God—stern; all rules and punishment—doesn't inspire joy.

Or there may be practical reasons. The stress of planning and shopping and cooking and cleaning up after Christmas dinner robs us of the joy of the event.

Or, maybe it's just the world situation: bombs and bullets flying in Gaza, rockets falling all over Russian and Ukraine, pictures of starving children and wailing widows and mangled bodies… It's hard to be joyful.

The drums are beating, the band is playing, the horses are pulling the carriages… Bobby runs to his room and digs out the old toy drum. Soon he's marching up and down the living room in front of the television, beating his drum …until Mother realizes what's going on and says, "No! Can't you see our President is dead!"

AM I NEVER TO JOIN A PARADE FOR FEAR IT MIGHT BE SOMEBODY'S FUNERAL?

Shall I *never* laugh because children are starving in Sudan, or bombs are exploding in Jerusalem?

And yet, with Roman soldiers everywhere, Elizabeth laughs. And Mary lifts her voice in joy: "My soul magnifies the Lord!"

How did they do it?

The joy of advent is the foolishness of faith. It is the foolishness that says I can rejoice because *even in the darkness of Ramah,* A CHILD IS BORN! It is the foolishness of faith that dares believe that this baby—born of peasant parents—in a barn—in backward country—in a primitive time—is the Lord of Christmas; that the Lord of Christmas is also the Lord of Ramah! We talk about Christmas miracles. The real miracle of Christmas is that anybody believed!

The painful reality is that Ramah **is** our world. But the Joy of Mary is that in Christ, Rachel has found her children. In Christ, the "Voice of Ramah" can join the "Song of Mary".

Invitation to the Table

Today's reading from Hebrew Scriptures is **ISAIAH 61:1-3.** It's the text Jesus used in his first recorded teaching in his hometown synagogue:

The spirit of YHWH Elohim is upon me
because YHWH has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
…
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. **(NRSVUE)**

Phillips Graduate Seminary President, Nancy Pittman, writes:

"The Spirit of the Lord God may well be upon us. The Lord God may well have anointed us to proclaim the year of God's favor and to give the oil of gladness instead of mourning to captives, prisoners, and the oppressed. We may indeed be blessed as God causes righteousness and justice to spring up around us like wild pecan seedlings, but who has time to attend to any of that? I'm just trying to get to Christmas."

And in today's Epistle reading, Paul has the nerve to say from prison, "Rejoice always!" Not because we live stress-free, peaceful lives, but precisely in the midst of the chaos that too often consumes us. Not because we don't see injustice and indifference, even in December, but because we can proactively celebrate their end, "for unto us a child is born," and because that child grew up to say, *"I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves."*

Maybe today, if only for a few minutes, we can remember that joy in the taste of a loaf and a cup.

Pastoral Prayer

God of life, today we remember the message the angel spoke to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

Lord, the good news of Jesus' birth offers such joy to our world! Help us to reach those who have lost their way and are searching for the abundant, joyful life Jesus came to give. Give us the words that offer reasons for Hope, Peace, and Joy.

As we all go about the holiday season, let your message of great joy pierce through all the noise and busyness and reach into our hearts and fill them to overflowing.

In a world in which fear and alienation too often are stronger motivation than hope, and peace, and joy, let us be the voice crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

Make us true disciples of Christ, whose birth we prepare to celebrate.

Amen.