

Rejoice
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2015
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Texts: Micah 5.2-5a;
Isaiah 12.2-6;
Hebrews 10.5-10;
Luke 1.39-45

I can't tell you how many times over the last several weeks someone has asked "how old are your kids again?" When I say "four and seven" their face brightens as they say "Isn't Christmas so much fun when kids are young like that?" I am certain it is the unbridled joy that brings the smile to people's faces. Let's be real, a good part of the joy is the prospect of presents. I'm not naïve about this reality. You heard the children, though; there is more to it than just that. Children know how to do joy. In those conversations, I sense some longing to be in a closer proximity to that contagious joy.

There are all kinds of reasons why it gets harder for us to be swept up in joy as we get older. Sometimes it feels out of reach because of the weight of responsibility we carry or the pain of life that cannot be set aside. Given the suffering that is all over the news and in some cases all over your life it can feel downright inappropriate this invitation to rejoice. Until you begin to probe the context of these passages. None of them – not the song from Isaiah not the Magnificat from Luke – none of them comes from some idyllic care-free moment in history.

Take the song from Isaiah 12. We used this song as our call to confession in Early Worship last week because my sense is that few of us live in this space all the time. "Surely God is my salvation, I will trust and will NOT be afraid for the Lord God is my strength and my might and has become my salvation!"¹ This does exactly not describe the milieu we are living in these

¹ Isaiah 12.2, NRSV, emphasis added.

days where fear is rampant and trust is illusive. So we could just write off the prophet as living in some fantasy world until you take note that this song was inserted as the closing to the first section of the prophecy of Isaiah. Eleven chapters with headings like “The Wickedness of Judah, Judgment pronounced on Arrogance, Foreign Invasion Predicted.” Keep in mind all of this judgment comes as powerful enemies stand at their doorstep poised to attack and destroy. Then after all of this judgment is pronounced and the mounting fear is named, we find scattered throughout chapters 9-11 beautiful visions of God’s promise to restore them. All of it culminates in this song: “Surely God is my salvation”. Present tense...not God WILL BE my salvation...God IS. The trusting and the not being afraid is grounded for this prophet not in the shifting circumstances of life all around them but in the certainty of God’s presence; the unshakable strength of God with them.

The Magnificat is the exact same thing. Gordon reminded us last week that when Mary sings nothing as yet has changed. They are still an occupied people surrounded by corrupt and violent tyrants. Mary sings in the present tense. She celebrates God’s salvation to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly as if it were happening right now when nothing in the circumstances of their life has changed.

Where did the joy come from for that prophet or within Mary? That’s what I want to understand today. How can we be equipped to rejoice? To do this I want to imagine our way into Mary’s place in this story. She is a young girl – a teenager at most – and she has just been informed that she is pregnant before she is married. If you can imagine the crisis this might pose in the life of a 13, 14, 16 year old girl today just magnify the intensity by 10 fold or more. Her future is not just whispered gossip in the hallways she has brought shame on her family and on her fiancé. She faces the possibility of the death penalty. She may have mustered the courage in the moment to respond to the angel in faith “Here I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.”² What I wonder about is what was racing through her mind as she traveled from her home to the hill country where her cousin Elizabeth lived. She went with haste and I imagine her

² Luke 1.38, NRSV.

thoughts were racing faster than her feet. “What is Joseph going to think? What is my family going to do? What is my future going to hold?” With these thoughts she greets Elizabeth expecting her to echo these fears and judgments but finds instead that Elizabeth is in an entirely different space.

It wasn't fear coursing through Elizabeth's body but joy. It wasn't judgment that falls from lips but blessing. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”³ Whatever frame of mind Mary was in as she entered was completely transformed when she received these words of blessing. I did some reading through my sabbatical time about the ways we tend to pick up on the emotional fields we walk into. The more intense the emotional field the more contagious it becomes. We have all lived this reality as a nation of late. Fear has been spreading through our national discourse at alarming speeds. The fear that triggers us to blame and judge cuts across political divides. We can point to candidate, Donald Trump, who has been capitalizing on people's fears for security. He's an easy target because his rhetoric is so out there in terms of who he blames for this insecurity and how he would create the safety people are longing for. He is not some outlier any more. His following is growing and so is the volume of condemnation from the left. Scapegoating Trump as THE source of the problem fails to take into account the milieu we are all living in. He is tapping into fears that run deep across our nation. He isn't creating the fear, he is tapping the fear. Frankly, shouting in outrage does little to shift the emotional field.

The more I've been thinking about this exchange between Elizabeth and Mary I have come to see this story as a beautiful example of shifting what could have become an escalation of judgment and fear and instead becomes an escalation of blessing and joy. At the heart of this exchange is the receptivity Mary brings to Elizabeth. So many of us walk around so carefully defended. We live in our own world clinging tightly to our own perspectives. The research on the contagious nature of blessing points to the importance of being receptive; open to the perspectives and emotions and ways of thinking of the people around us. The receptivity in these few

³ Luke 1.42-43, NRSV.

verses is quite astounding. It begins with Elizabeth. She is receptive to the movement of the child within her womb. Both of them (the child and Elizabeth herself) are receptive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who is filling her and prompting her to speak. And Mary is receptive to the words of blessing that are washing over her now that I suspect are quite different from the thoughts that had been washing over her before she walked through that door. It's not just the emotion that Mary picks up from Elizabeth. It is a whole new way of framing her reality. She begins to see with crystal clarity what God is doing and it is counter to the "facts" if you will of her circumstances. It prompts her to sing this incredible prophetic song that puts her line with the great prophets of old.

The incredible exchange between them, powerful as it is on the face of it, clearly takes time to settle inside of Mary. She spends three months with Elizabeth. Three months I suspect of dwelling in this place so that the transformation inside of her becomes strong enough for her to hold onto it when she goes back home and begins to deal with the realities that await her there.

So where do we go when we are in need of a transformation of mind and heart? Who is the Elizabeth for us who can shake us from the places of fear and push us toward conviction and trust and joy? This last week Presidents of the several Presbyterian Seminaries, which includes our dear friend and former Hope Church member, Leanne VanDyke, issued an appeal calling on Christians throughout our nation to keep turning back to the gospel as we talk politics as a nation; to be careful about the fear and the pride that can lead us away from the convictions of our faith⁴. Coming into clarity about who God is and how God works is a very good starting place. But it is just that: a starting place. The vision Mary describes would unfold over time, over lifetimes. In fact it's still unfolding. What I find more compelling than posturing and outrage are the acts of hospitality, the embrace of generosity. Let's stand in those places, share those stories, and be part of those movements. Let's keep pointing to the gospel message of this season: the gift of Emmanuel, God-with us.

⁴ You can read this appeal at

<http://www.journalforpreachers.com/An%20Appeal%20to%20Christians%20in%20the%20U.S..html>

No matter what the firestorm we may be facing we are not alone. The One who goes with us is strong; powerful to save. And this One surrounds us with people, with community, with Elizabeths who can speak blessing to our fear pushing to us to trust and not be afraid. And when we find that place of illusive trust --- we cannot help but rejoice!!!