

JOY  
Luke 1:46b-55  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

This week's lectionary selection is part of a section in the Gospel of Luke that describes the events surrounding the Annunciations of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. After the opening prologue, the narrative describes how a Temple priest, Zechariah, is visited by the archangel Gabriel, who tells Zechariah that Elizabeth, his barren wife, would have a son, they were to name him John, he would give them and many others joy, he was to be raised as a Nazirite, which was a consecrated man or woman, the most famous of which was Samson, and also would minister in the spirit of Elijah, whose return would herald the arrival of the Messiah. Zechariah was doubtful of all this, so he is struck mute, and Elizabeth conceives.

Six months later, the Archangel Gabriel returns to Earth, appearing to Mary, telling her that the Holy Spirit will impregnate her, and that she will give birth to a boy, who will be named Jesus, the Son of God, who will occupy the throne of Jacob forever, and then that her cousin Elizabeth has also conceived as well. So Mary immediately travels to visit Elizabeth, who rejoiced at hearing the news that Mary is also with child.

Our selection begins with Mary's response to Elizabeth, which is also called the Magnificat, a canticle or hymn of praise. The canticle recalls the Song of Hannah, from the Book of Samuel, who, like Elizabeth, was a barren woman who miraculously gave birth, as God promised. Because of this, some old Latin manuscripts attributed this canticle to Elizabeth, not Mary. However, earlier Greek manuscripts attributes it to Mary. I personally feel that since both are sharing in this event, either one could be the singer of this canticle.

The purpose of this canticle is to give joyful praise to God for God's justice and mercy, and will continue to do so in memory of the promise made to Abraham and his descendants forever. The canticle follows traditional grammar found in Scripture that uses the past tense to describe what God has done, while at the same time, what is hoped that God will do in the future. So, God has looked favorably on God's lowly servant...and will continue to do so. The Mighty One has done great things, scattered the proud, brought

down the powerful, lifted the lowly, fed the hungry, destituted the rich, and helped his servants...and will continue to do so. This also follows the pattern that is found throughout Luke's Gospel, where the fortunes of people are reversed.

This week in Advent is about Joy. Joy is the emotion evoked by well-being, success, good fortune, or being in a state of happiness. You know Calvin and Hobbes? The comic strip? I really enjoy them, and I have the complete box set. I have it my study at the parsonage, and the side panel on it has a picture of Calvin and Hobbes dancing like no one can see them; and it repeatedly caught my eye while preparing this service. To me, that panel embodies Joy.

Though, the first thing that came to mind while meditating on Joy was an old tv show called Babylon 5, which had an episode that many youth groups have used for discussions on the concept of forgiveness. However, at the beginning of the episode, there is an interchange between the main character, a senior monk, and the star of the week, who is a junior monk. The main character is shown a small sculpture made by the junior monk, and he remarked at the great artistic skill involved. The senior monk lamented that the junior monk refuses to sell his works of art, after all, their order could really use the money. The junior monk replied, "I take joy first in the making and then in the giving. I am doubly blessed."

Later, when I was in college, as stress relief, I would make small sketches, using pen and colored pencils. Nature scenes, landscapes, seascapes, stuff like that. Then I would give them to my friends, especially those who have been feeling down, to cheer them up. I took that advice to heart and took joy from the making of art, and then in giving it away.

My favorite artform, though, is photography. I have been practicing it for decades now, a skill that I learned from my mother, and for my formal training, she presented me with her first SLR camera, the Olympus OM-1, which I still use. I wanted to share this joy of photography that I have, so during my second tour of service with AmeriCorps, I started an after-school photography program for inner-city children and youth at the Boys & Girls Club of Worcester. These kids had not had any other artistic outlet, and a

number of them were considered the troublemakers. I put a camera in their hands, gave them some lessons, and a checklist of types of photos to take that would teach them the skills, then unleashed them in downtown Worcester. They did amazing. Every afternoon, they would run to me for their lesson and timeslot with the camera, then run off to unseen corners of the building, or take friends in tow to pose, or crawl into places one wouldn't have considered and make art of it. They would return full of joy and would crowd around as the photos are loading onto the computer for closer looks. They entered a county-wide photography contest, placing better than professionals with 30 yrs more experience! They also had gallery shows, were published many times, and then staged an iron chef-style photo competition. One girl, Zee, adored her older brother, who was a boxer. During one of his matches, she wanted to take a good photo of him, so during the time between rounds, I hoisted her partially into the ring and she took a photo from an angle usually not seen in sports photography, and she loved it so much, and could not wait to present it to her brother. She was so proud of it, and was filled with such joy in both the making and the giving of it.

Yesterday, I was at our Breakfast with Santa, and a young girl named Isabella walked in, clutching an orange piece of paper, and in her little voice called out to everyone in the fellowship hall, "Merry Christmas!" Then, she saw Santa. There was a look of incredible joy on her face as she scurried up to him and presented him with the piece of paper.

As we close in on Christmas, we should not forget about Joy. We should remember the pure Joy that Isabella felt. We should remember the adage, it is better to give than it is to receive. We should take Joy from the company of our friends and families. We should seek Joy whenever we need to escape the pressures of our stressful lives. We should endeavor to be doubly blessed...both by making Joy, and then by giving Joy.

Amen