

JOY II
Luke 1:46b-55
Colebrook Congregational Church
3rd 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. I have the complete box set of Calvin & Hobbes in 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 frequently catches my eye. 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.

A friend of mine, while discussing Joy, spoke about “borrowing joy.” Years ago, she was depressed for a while and she heard about a celebratory rally for some historic milestone, and she decided to go. She wanted to borrow the joy of the crowd celebrating in the park, to feel the good vibes from them, and let them sweep her up as well, lifting her spirits and letting her feel Joy.

While on a recent outing, I came across a book called, “Dancers Among Us,” which has the subtitle, “A Celebration of Joy in the Everyday.” In his introduction, the photographer wrote, “These photographs communicate my dreams for [my children] more powerfully than words alone: Relish moments large and small, recognize the beauty around you, and be alive!”

[Crossing the street. pp. 10-11]

[Fishing. pp. 60]

[Shoveling asphalt in ballet slippers en pointe p. 148]

[Shoveling snow. p. 163]

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

Pastoral Prayer

Merciful God, your work, spoken by the prophets, restores our lives and hopes. Fill our hearts with the joy of your saving grace, that we may hold fast to your great goodness and in our lives proclaim your justice in all the world. And as we joyfully await the glorious coming of the Christ, we offer prayers for the needs of the church, our community, and the world.

We give you thanks for all our loved ones, for lessons learned, and opportunities to serve our neighbors. We pray for all who need assistance and need joy in their lives, and we ask to be Your instruments in delivering joy and meeting needs. We pray for everyone who needs You. We pray for all who are sick and are suffering, that they be healed; and that You guide the hands of their caregivers. We pray for all who are alone, that we can bring them company. We pray for all who are in distress, that we can bring them comfort. We pray for the forgiveness of sins, and we thank You for Your understanding. We pray for peace throughout your creation.

We offer to You the prayer of our hearts, especially...

O God of joy and exultation, you strengthen what is weak; you enrich the poor and give hope to those who live in fear. Look upon our needs this day. Make us grateful for the good news of salvation and keep us faithful in your service until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives for ever and ever. Amen.