

Message for the third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Luke 1:39-55 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Bring it on!

Our grandson, Adrian, who is four years old, knows exactly how many days it is until Christmas. He's filled with eager anticipation. Bring it on! It's wonderful to once again have little children in the family for whom Christmas is so exciting, for whom the prospect of Christmas brings great joy. The prospect of being with these children at Christmas brings me great joy.

Joy is our topic on this third Sunday of Advent. The story of Mary and Elizabeth is filled to overflowing with joy. To read and reflect upon it makes my heart sing.

Earlier in this first chapter of the gospel of Luke, Mary is visited by an angel with some astounding news: You, Mary, will become pregnant, even though you are not yet married. You will have a son, whom you will name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. Mary is taken aback, of course. Goodness gracious, "How can this be?" After a bit more conversation with the angel, which includes the news that her older cousin Elizabeth is also miraculously pregnant, and the reminder that nothing is impossible with God, Mary says, OK, let's do this. "Let it be with me according to your word." This is weird but very exciting! Bring it on!

We get a sense of just how excited Mary is in the first words of the story that we read this morning. Mary "set out and went with haste" to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She is full to brimming with wonder and joy and she needs to share it with someone in the same boat, someone who is also experiencing an unexpected, marvelous pregnancy, someone whose very body has also become a vessel for God.

This is not some cerebral, esoteric experience for Mary and for Elizabeth. It is visceral and real in the way that our bodies are real. Their responses come from their guts, or rather their wombs, which is where God has lodged. There is no holding back. When Elizabeth first sees Mary, the Spirit moves in her and she exclaims with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" She has no doubt that Mary brings something special. She has confirmation that this is real. "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting," she says to Mary, "the child in my womb leaped for joy."

Then, in the presence of Elizabeth, Mary lets her joy overtake her. She opens up her heart and sings. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

Mary's joy comes from a wonderful epiphany: God is doing marvelous things for us! This is God's way of responding to us who are poor and downtrodden, those of us who are haven't known where to turn next. This is God's mercy on us! "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." This miracle that is happening in my lowly body, is the realization of God's promises to us! It's really happening! Let it be! Bring it on!

Notice that what Mary understands about the fulfilling of God's promises is very humanity based, very concrete. God is responding to real needs. The lowly are lifted up.

The hungry are filled with good things. This happens because unjust political and economic systems are turned upside down. The proud are scattered in the thoughts of their hearts. The powerful are brought down from their thrones. The rich are sent away empty. What Mary sees, and what gives her great joy, is a reversal of the way things have been. She foresees an opening up of possibilities that have previously been withheld from her and those like her who are at the bottom of the societal heap. She sees a Savior at hand. She understands from the depth of her being that God coming to live among us is truly good news for the lowly and the poor.

Can we join Mary in this joy? I'd like us to spend some time this morning thinking about the ways we see reversal happening in our world. Where do we see the lowly being lifted up and the hungry being filled with good things? Where do we see folks responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit in very concrete ways? What do we see that is a source of hope and joy in our often troubled world? I'll give a couple of examples; then I'm going to ask you to share yours.

Mike Martin's work with RAWtools is to me a source of joy. Mike is a member of Beth-El Mennonite Church in Colorado Springs. In response to the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012, Mike felt compelled to respond to the scourge of gun violence. He pondered the words of the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Micah about beating swords into plowshares. The swords of today are guns, he realized. The plowshares of today are garden tools. He established RAWtools to literally beat unwanted guns into garden tools.

In the nearly four years since he started RAWtools, Mike estimates he's taken in a couple hundred guns, and made around 60 garden tools – tiny numbers in comparison

to the nearly 300 million guns in America. He says he recognizes the complexity of the gun debate, and doesn't expect to turn all the nation's firearms into spades and hoes. But, he see a role for organizations like his, which advocate for nonviolence at the grassroots level, provide a ritual space for processing grief, and offer symbolic tools for sowing peace in the world. The work of RAWtools is the work of reversal. It challenges the dysfunctional way things are. This is done concretely, bodily, creatively with real guns, anvils and fire. Folks are involved in literally turning tools of death into tools of life. This give me hope and brings me joy.

Example #2: Sarah Jackson cares for folks who have been detained or have family members who have been detained by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). In response to the needs she saw among these folks who are undeniably at the bottom of our societal heap, Sarah established Casa de Paz in Aurora, near the detention center. Casa de Paz (which translated is House of Peace) offers free lodging and meals to guests visiting their loved ones held inside the immigrant detention center. They also host guests who have recently been released from the detention center and need a place to stay as they make plans to make their way back home. In this way Sarah and her volunteer colleagues, fill those who are hungry – bodily, physically, literally hungry as well as hungry for hope and for human kindness – with good things. They also challenge the status quo which treats immigrants as criminals, by remembering and living out the words of the Old Testament: “You, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.” Sarah and Casa de Paz give me hope and joy.

Now it's your turn. In this Advent season, in our community and in the world,

where to do you see reversal happening? Where do you see the lowly being lifted up and the hungry filled with good things. What gives you hope and joy?

Folks in the congregation share.

I want to leave you this morning with words that the apostle Paul wrote to the church in ancient Thessalonika as they were figuring out what it means to be living out the good news of Jesus Christ in a world in need of reversal, a world much like ours today.

“Rejoice always,” Paul says to them. “Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.” I really like that; it reminds me of Mary and Elizabeth. “Do not quench the spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets (like Mary and Elizabeth), but test everything; hold fast to what is good (that which lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things); and abstain from every form of evil (that which fosters fear, greed, self-hatred and isolation). May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, God With Us. The one who calls you is faithful; the one who calls you will do this.”

With Mary and Elizabeth let us joyfully say, “Bring it on! Let it be whole.”

Amen.