

Spirit Rejoice

Luke 1:46-55
December 12, 2021

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

The Rev. Rob Elder tells of a time as a young boy using a magnifying glass to burn a hole through a piece of paper. Reflecting on this, he says, “A piece of paper left in ... a bright sun all day will still not burst into flames. But in just a few seconds, the rays of the sun, (when) focused by a magnifying glass ..., will bring terrific heat (and) it will begin to burn.”

“I will magnify the Lord,” says Mary. Mary’s magnification of God does not increase God’s size, does not expand God’s care. Mary’s magnification works like that little magnifying glass that costs less than \$5. Little, humble, limited as it is, (the magnifying glass) has the capacity to bring the greatness of the sun to bear – to magnify it – so that it can have tremendous impact....”

“Mary’s willingness to be the bearer of the Messiah meant that a humble, peasant girl from ... Palestine could serve to help make God’s magnificence known across the world. God’s desire to save, to love, to bring us into relationship was made more visible because of this humble girl.”¹ And this brings great joy to her heart. “My spirit rejoices ...,” says Mary.

The joy Mary felt – that is no small thing. Mary had lots of reasons to feel lots of things, and joy wasn’t one of them. Earlier in Luke, Mary had just been told by an angel of the Lord that she was to be an unwed mother. Luke tells us this left Mary “much perplexed,” uncertain, afraid, and questioning God.

Have you ever felt perplexed, uncertain and afraid by something that came without warning, something that just took over your life? There are lots of things that do this to people – unexpected pregnancy among them.

But really, with any sudden change in your health or physical condition – all of a sudden you can’t do what you used to. And that can leave you uncertain, afraid and questioning God. Or there’s that sudden financial change, either from an unexpected expense or a loss of income; that’ll do it, also. A real bad fight with your spouse or your best friend is another thing that can leave you uncertain, afraid and questioning God.

These are all things that trouble us and leave us just as perplexed about life as Mary, as we ask what is God up to, anyway!?!

¹ —Rob Elder, “Magnificent!” First Presbyterian Church of Salem, Oregon, December 7, 2003.

You know, Christmas is just around the corner. And Christmas is a time when God comes to us in surprising ways, ways that can overcome our troubles and bless our lives – if we're paying attention, being watchful for his coming, his reassurance, his gift to us and to the world.

What gift are you looking forward to this Christmas? Oh, I'm not talking about a present under the tree. I'm talking about a divine gift, something that you need that would really turn things around for you this year. Maybe it is a better job, better health, a better relationship with someone in your life. Maybe it's a more balanced lifestyle or weekly schedule. Maybe what you long for most right now is peace on earth, goodwill to men, as they say.

But think about it. Think about what each of these particular needs and desires really brings you. A better job.... Isn't that really a desire for security, for yourself and your family? Better health. That's often a desire for comfort and the ability to do things. At the heart of better relationships is our connection to others. And what we gain from a better balance in life is really a sense of serenity and wellbeing. Security for yourself and your family, a sense of comfort in your abilities, a meaningful connection with others, wellbeing in life, and a sense of peace come what may – all of these gifts are available to you as a beloved child of God, if you have the presence of mind to claim them, a heart turned to God and ready to receive his blessings, his gifts.

You know, life does not have to be that complicated for those who truly trust in the Lord. A childlike sense of joy and wellbeing is available to us all as God's beloved. Take for example the 4-year-old and the Popsicle. A guy named David Martyn tells of the time his 4-year-old brother ventured out with 10 dollars in Monopoly money in hand. He walked a block down the alley and half a block up to the store. ... He got a Popsicle out of the freezer, plopped down his Monopoly money and left. Seeing his little brother, Martyn asked, "Where did you get the Popsicle?" "I bought it at the store," he said. "Where did you get the money?" And with that, the 4-year-old digs into his pocket and pulls out a crunched-up Monopoly bill. "But you can't use that money. It's not real," cried the older brother. "Oh!" said the 4-year-old, with a quizzical look. Then, taking another lick of the Popsicle, he said, "This is real."²

So, too, Mary declares a reality no one else sees – the favor of the Lord upon his lowly servants, upon us, his beloved children. In the midst of the heartache of 1st century Palestine, Mary declares, "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."

² David Martyn, on the Ecunet computer bulletin board, 2001.

The promise of that future reality – that is what brought joy to Mary’s heart, even though no one else saw it, envisioned it. And this is what can bring joy to our hearts, when we look beneath the surface of our wants and needs. Just beneath the surface of our wants and needs are the blessings of God, blessings that God gives even in the midst of our greatest struggles. Security, comfort, connectedness, wellbeing, and an abiding sense of peace – all of that is available to you as a beloved child of God.

As Mary declares, “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” “... To Abraham and to his descendants, forever.” That’s us! We are Abraham’s descendants-in-faith. And as such, we are invited to receive God’s blessings of security, comfort, connectedness, wellbeing, and peace – the true gifts of Christmas!

In order to find those gifts under your tree this year, to find them in your heart of hearts, one must nurture a heart like Mary’s. Just look at Mary throughout the life of Jesus. Now there’s a heart open to God’s blessings. As a young girl visited out of the blue by an angel, Mary proclaims God’s goodness, even in such uncertain times. As an unwed mother-to-be, Mary trusts in God’s word, God’s faithfulness. As the mother of Jesus, Mary stays near to the Lord, even when she doesn’t understand what he’s doing. Amid his suffering, Mary grieves alongside Jesus. In the moments of his death, Mary receives the blessing of the Lord, when Jesus turns to the Apostle John and says, “Here is your mother.” And to Mary, saying, “Woman, here is your son.”

The point is, God’s blessings, God’s gifts are available to you throughout all of life – weather as a child wanting a little treat, a youth wanting a little certainty and reassurance, an adult responsible for the family’s security, an older adult in desperate need of comfort and wellbeing, or a whole world in need of peace.

All of these blessings and the joy they bring are available to us this Christmas and always. And all we need to do to receive them, is to trust in the promise of God, the promise born to us some 2,000 years ago, in the babe of Bethlehem. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of infinite tenderness and constant faithfulness, in the season of Advent, you give us longer nights and a gentle chill; a time of waiting and hoping, longing and dreaming.

Like Mary in her anticipation of the arrival of the baby Jesus, we feel something stir within us ... a sense of wonder at the starlit sky, a feeling of special love for our families, a twinge of joy as we find a gift to express that love, a little panic as we recall all that is to be done, a sudden stillness when we sense your divine Presence.

O God, help us be attentive to the rise of hope within us, bidding us to fresh expressions of hope, joy, love and peace.

We pray your spirit of comfort, peace and healing upon all struggling with illness, grief, and upset. We pray these and all the concerns of our hearts, in the name of Jesus Christ, the One who was, is and will come again, Jesus who taught us to pray saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.