

“The Joy of an Upside-Down World”

The third advent candle, that is the candle of joy, always unnerves me a little. Maybe because it falls at that time each year when the whole Christmas season has started to make me panic. Have I gotten all the gifts I need to buy? NO. Have I addressed and mailed the Christmas cards? NO. Do I know what I am serving on Christmas Day? NO. Do I realize that I have to write THREE sermons for the upcoming Christmas week? YES! But I don't think that is why the joy candles is a stretch for me.

In all honesty, I suspect it is because, of the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – JOY is the hardest one for me to really hold on to.

Now please don't misunderstand me. I don't mean that I am unhappy. I have a very blessed, fulfilling life. I am thankful every day for my family, my health, that God finally clued me in to what I was called to do in life and I finally listened, and that God brought me to such a precious church family to be surrounded by. But that is not joy. That is happiness. Yet, for reasons I have not been able to name, joy often seems to elude me. And in this season of joy, pastors realize that there are other emotions that our flock must deal with that make joy a struggle for them too. Of course, all of this soul-searching led me to ponder the difference between joy and happiness.

Then I remembered that I had actually led a women's retreat on JOY once, so I pulled out my old notes. In them, I had written “Joy and happiness are wonderful feelings to experience but are very different. Joy is more consistent and is cultivated internally. It comes when you make

peace with who you are and why you are. Happiness tends to be externally triggered and is based on other people, things, places, thoughts and events.”

That is a very apt comparison and but makes me feel so inadequate when I read Mary’s response to the visit from the angel Gabriel. Mary is a teenage girl from a backwater town who lives a modest existence. Not only is she living in a time when women have absolutely no status in life other than to be somebody’s daughter or somebody’s wife, but now she finds herself pregnant and unmarried! Yet, her song is one of pure joy. How can that be? And what lessons can we learn from her?

One very important lesson that Mary teaches us is that when the angel told her that SHE had been chosen from all the women in the world to bear the Lord’s son, Mary realized that the details of her life were connected with God’s bigger plan. And that is true for all of us. Now, *that* is a reason to be joyful. Do you remember a time when you learned this lesson?

Think about the people who have really, I MEAN REALLY, made a difference in your life. And even more importantly in your walk with God. I would venture a guess that there is not a professional athlete, an Oscar winner, a famous singer or a well-known politician among them. More than likely they are teachers, high school coaches, peers from your youth group, grandmothers or neighbors who showed you unconditional love and gave you the support you needed when you needed it most. They modeled the values of Christian living every day.

In 1972, when I was in the 6th grade, I had my first African American teacher. I will never forget Evelyn McKinney as long as I live. She was about 6 feet tall, dressed elegantly in suits and silk blouses and high heeled pumps and paced back and forth in front of the blackboard while she taught us Social Studies. I was awestruck!

I can picture her right now, with all her beauty and grace. However, the reason I will always remember her is because one day, she had us participate in an unusual assignment. I don't think it had anything to do with Social Studies. I used to think she was just killing time, but as I have gotten older, I realize that she was doing a bit of team building and helping us with our own self-perception.

Mrs. McKinney had everyone take out a piece of notebook paper and number the lines 1 – 25. At the top, she asked us to write "I AM." Then she asked us to fill in the 25 lines with ways we would describe ourselves. Things like – "I am a brother" or "I am a basketball player" or "I am a good math student." Then she took up the papers and read them aloud and we had to guess who each person was by the things they wrote about themselves.

At this time in my life, I was still going to church with neighbors who invited me or to my own church when my mom would drop me off, but my family had not yet discovered the importance of a church community. Still, the first thing I wrote on my paper was, "I am a child of God."

As the bell rang, Mrs. McKinney asked me to come up to her desk. Of course, I thought I had done something wrong and approached her timidly, but she grabbed me, pulled my head to her ample bosom and said, "I am so proud to know you. Don't you EVER be afraid to tell people that you belong to the Lord."

That was a pivotal moment in my life. It was when I, like Mary, realized that God actually paid attention to a 12-year-old girl in Greenville, South Carolina. That God sent people into my life to help me know about God's love. And whenever I remember that moment, I am filled with joy.

Everything about Mary's response was joyful! That is why it is referred to as the Magnificat, meaning "magnifies" in Latin. Mary helps us realize that this is a larger-than-life moment. She breaks into song – a song of praise- for who God is in her world and in her life. And in doing so, Mary teaches us another important lesson about joy. You see, the angel's message does not erase the challenges that Mary faces – unmarried and pregnant, poor, young. So, we learn that joy is not the absence of struggle. In realizing that her life is connected to a greater story, she gives us hope in the present, no matter our circumstances. Sometimes our joy must come from our hope for a better day.

Her faith, in the midst of such trouble, sent me back to my notes on the retreat from joy and I saw that on the next page I had written definitions for *Biblical* joy. Here is a quick summary of some of the things I read. I wish I had written all my sources because I KNOW these cannot be my own words.

Joy differs from happiness in that it is an emotion. Happiness, on the other hand, is what we might think of as a feeling, which is more fleeting. Joy may be thought of as "the emotional dimension of the good life, of a life that is both going well and is being lived well." Of course, the ultimate Source of supernatural Joy is the Spirit of Christ."

And don't we all have the same access to that Spirit that Mary did? Christmas can be overwhelming in our 21st century society because of its concentration with acquiring and doing. But add to this the grief and loss that some will navigate this year as they face the empty chair or unpacked stocking for the first time. Or the loneliness that some will feel because they cannot travel, or they have no family or because they are not blessed to have a church home. These are the things that some of *us* may be facing or will *ultimately* face and Mary teaches us that we must pray for joy, rather than happiness, during these times of loss. After all, just as the Spirit

comforted and encouraged Mary, that same Spirit is available to help us feel joy even when we are sad or overwhelmed or tired or lonely.

But the most important thing that Mary teaches us is the joy that she finds in the promises made and kept by the God of her ancestors. The God of Abraham, Jacob, Miriam and Ruth. The promises made to OUR ancestors that helped them as they wandered in the desert, faced numerous enemies, lived in Exile and suffered oppression. Mary knows, because she was raised in a household of faith, that when God makes a promise, God keeps that promise. And that promises kept are life-altering and bring joy.

Pittsburgh Seminary Theology Professor Andrew Purvis, writes of this song: “When God announces the divine intention to act decisively in the incarnation of the Word, everything gets turned on its head.” THAT is where Mary finds her joy. She knows in her heart that the God who keeps promises is in the process of turning the world upside-down.

Mary’s song is one where all the roles in the world are reversed. The modest will be made noble and all those who think they have everything because of the “things” in their lives will be brought down. The weak will have the upper hand and those in power who looked after themselves and their own ambitions will find themselves at the bottom of the heap. The hungry children will go to bed with their bellies full and the rich will have nothing.

In fact, Mary is SO convinced that the child that she carries in her womb will be a radical agent of change that she sings in the past tense. You see in Greek, just as in the English, Mary’s song reads like this: God HAS scattered the proud; God HAS lifted up the lowly; God HAS filled the hungry with good things and God HAS sent the rich away empty. She knows that the child she carries will change the world – one day – and she sings as if it has already happened.

Mary sings that not only HAS God done a new thing in history, but that God will continue to make all things new. Her faith allows her to say yes to God when she doesn't really know what she is agreeing to. She just knows that God is a God of justice and so she says "yes" to justice for all. And because of her joy, she is a preliminary role model for serious disciples. Here's what I mean.

If you read the eblast that went out Thursday, you know that in my studies of this passage, I came across a new word. In truth, I must have learned it in Seminary, but I guess the Holy Spirit knew I didn't need it until now. The word is "theotokos" and I kept seeing it over and over in the commentaries I used. It means "God-bearer." The word describes Mary because she LITERALLY carries God – the Word made flesh in her womb. But she also bears God into the world by her joy. She takes the faith that is rooted in the legacy of her people into her current circumstances, as downtrodden as they were. And in doing so, I believe she calls us all to be God-bearers.

Mary bears the news that, through her Son, God has broken through the status quo. God has shattered the glass ceiling. God has turned the world upside down. Mary lives this belief out for the rest of her days. Believing in her son when others in her family did not. Following him, wherever his mission took him, even to the cross. Bearing God into the world as he rose up from the grave to save us all from sin in her faithfulness.

Friends, WE need to bear God's image into the world because 1 in 5 children go to bed hungry in the richest nation in the world while we pay a professional athlete \$324 for nine years to play baseball. In South Carolina, there are at present 5,894 beds dedicated to serving persons currently or formerly experiencing homelessness, yet over 11,000 people in this state alone have no shelter. That is over 5000 people who may have slept in the cold last night, right here in our

own state. Elected politicians still grapple for power by discrediting in the enemy, keeping them from fulfilling the jobs that we elected them to do. So where do we find joy in all of this?

Donald Campbell former President of Dallas Theological Seminary says “Joy is a deep and abiding inner rejoicing which was promised to those who abide in Christ. It does not depend on circumstances because it rests in God’s sovereign control of all things.” Friends, this is the belief that we must cling to in order to have the joy of Mary.

How would things look different in Moore, South Carolina if the lowly were truly lifted up and the powerful were sent away with their tails between their legs? We may never know. But if we are to have any hope of finding out, we are to remember the joy of Mary and bear God into the world. We are to hold on to the example that Jesus Christ left for us who, when he had to choose between legalism and love, between the status quo and radical servanthood, chose to bear God into the world. Every time. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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