**Mary’s Song**

**December 14, 2024**

**Advent Joy, the Third Week of Advent**

**Rev. Christine E. Burns**

***“And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of our Lord comes to me for as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” Luke 1:41-44***

 **I love to go the mailbox this time of year. While we usually receive bills and catalogs for things I will never buy, in December we still receive handwritten or neatly pre-printed labels on fancy square envelopes with Christmas stamps. Inside, I greedily open them first, unless they are Reed’s friends alone and then lay them on the edge of the kitchen counter. Christmas cards, holiday cards are one tradition that many of us still cling to despite being in the digital age. There is something so satisfying ripping open a letter written to you with a message of love, hope, joy and peace. Sometimes they are beautiful family photos. Reed always wants it to be the entire family, not only the beautiful kids. Sometimes it’s a lovely hand selected Christmas card with a shaky cursive message from a senior friend who lives thousands of miles away. We love getting cards from the members of this church, friends from our neighborhoods in Needham, and Fort Collins, Boulder, and Ambler.**

 **This year I ordered a box of 100 cards printed by Minted and the box arrived a few days ago. Picking out the acceptable photo for our family card was a diplomatic endeavor. My first attempt was vetoed by my older and wiser daughters, and I happily accepted a new photo and technical intervention with my oldest daughter contacting the card company and having them change the photo to make sure that everyone was in the photo, and it was a certified and specially chosen family photo of the year. If you have a large family, or an opinionated family, you may resonate with my experience.**

 **I am thrilled, indeed joyful, with our selected family photo of the year. What makes this year’s card so special is we are introducing our newest family member, baby Sophie. The long anticipated and joyfully born child of Katie and Chris has filled our hearts and lives with joy. We echo Mary’s song of joy in our own yes to the arrival and growth of Sophia Susan.**

 **What do you think when you find several Christmas cards in your mailbox? What memories of joy flood in as you open a letter connecting you to a loved one from far away?**

 **Today’s Gospel lesson from Luke tells the story of Mary now six months pregnant running to meet Elizabeth in a Judean hilltop town. Mary has run away from Nazareth. Perhaps she fears being stoned as she is not married and visibly pregnant. Luke’s Gospel is written like a symphony in four parts with songs. The first song is the song of Zachariah who sings to the angel wondering how his ancient wife could bear a child. That song and disbelief left him mute.**

 **In today’s message we enter the story as the older woman Elizabeth greets and embraces young Mary and exclaims. “*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of our Lord comes to me for as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”* Luke 1:42-44.**

 **And Mary, she responds with her own song which has been known throughout Christendom as the Magnificat. Her soul, her song, her body, her womb magnifies the Lord. She knew she was carrying the Son of God in her body. Listen carefully to her song of Praise.**

46And Mary[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%201%3A46-56&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-24932a)] said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
47    and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.
    Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
49for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
    and holy is his name;
50indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
    from generation to generation.
51He has shown strength with his arm;
    he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
52He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
    and lifted up the lowly;
53he has filled the hungry with good things
    and sent the rich away empty.
54He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
    in remembrance of his mercy,
55according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
    to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

56And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

 Mary, this unmarried teenager running from the stone-throwers and the gossips, embraces Elizabeth and then sings of power, of overthrowing the rich and filling the hungry with good things to eat. It was not a good time for her to be pregnant. The world was at war, filled with danger, poverty and oppression and she was one of the lowly. To her, to one of the forgotten, an uneducated woman with no status, no husband, no power, an angel appeared, and she listened, she agreed and then she said Yes! This is where the joy sneaks in. Luke Bretherton, theologian, calls this time when things aren’t going well “tragic time.” In the slippery world that Mary found herself pregnant, greeting Elizabeth, something magical began to happen. Babies leaped in their wombs. The men fell silent. Elizabeth’s husband was struck mute for questioning the angel and Joseph fell silent. He doesn’t question Mary. He listens and then she goes away for three months, quietly to the countryside to be with her cousin Elizabeth and care for this baby in her womb. This baby boy who she already knows is the fulfillment of the prophecy that a son of Abraham and David and a child of God is growing in her womb.

 This year, this Advent season, where this week we light the rose candle for joy, we are invited to see where joy sneaks into our lives. Is it in the Christmas cards in your post box? Can it be found making recipes of loved ones long gone who taught you how to make Spritz cookies using the aluminum cookie press which you have now replaced with a modern plastic one? Could it be through the laughter at the cookie swap with Women in the Spirit or men’s breakfast? Is it in caroling around a piano or screaming out loud to the radio songs as you drive your kids to yet another swim practice, school program or endless meeting? Do you find joy listening to Christmas music from long ago or the latest Christmas Pop selection on Spotify? Where do you find joy?

 Some of us seek joy in the quiet of a flickering candle or walking out into the cold night air and gazing up at the constellations. May you see joy and feel joy as your fingers click the knitting needles creating another prayer shawl knit love and prayers for the one who will receive it with love because at this moment joy may be hard to find. May you feel joy as you hug those you love.

 And some of us are not in a place to feel joy right now. I love this post by Rev. Jeff Chu, who offers a companion to Mary’s Magnificat for those of us who struggle to find joy right now.

Chu writes, “Bless you who feel grumpy, you who are blah. May you be met right where you are. Bless you who are weary, you who are flailing. May you find rest. Bless you who are burdened by grief, you whose heart is so heavy. May you not be rushed from those feelings, but may memories make you smile, too, and may laughter surprise you. Bless you who can’t quite muster any pre-Christmas cheer. May you plant seeds of goodness for seasons to come. Bless you who bristle at mandatory merriment. May you sense the solidarity and hospitality of the ancient story, which made room for fear, confusion, and bewilderment. Bless you who sit in darkness. May you find friendship there.” (@byjeffchu Instagram, Dec. 11, 2024)

 I always find comfort in the image of church as a hospital. We can’t all be sick at the same time. Some of us make the soup and cookies, others of us clean up the messes and tidy up other’s homes, some of us help figure out taxes and the maze of estate planning, others of us are caregivers, some of us are doctors and nurses, and some of us are patients. At one point or another, we will all end up at the ER or in scheduled surgery unless we actively choose not to seek Western medical care. And even so, we will need the care of prayers, prayer shawls, the Called to Care team dropping off Christmas cookies and cards handwritten with love on Christmas cards with a winter scene of our preschool children sledding on the same hill that children from West Barnstable have slid on for over 300 years.

 When I get discouraged, I turn the lights down. I plug in my Christmas tree. I play Joni Mitchell’s Blue album, and I light candles. I love to rewatch *Love Actually* and think about how love is, actually all around. Sometimes, I simply sit in the glow of the tree. I don’t tire of this kind of slow. It’s what my soul aches for.

 If you are trying to write a Christmas card this year and you are not bursting with good news and your soul is not magnifying the Lord like Mary, that’s ok. Perhaps the still small speaking voice of the Holy Spirit will blow through the leaves in a tunnel of wind that allows you to seek God’s presence in the decay of winter leaves.

 Do not miss this one precious life. Eat the cake or Christmas cookies. Be gentle with yourself and others. Send out the Christmas cards or grant yourself forgiveness that this year it is all too much to try to do Christmas cards as well. Tell the ones you love; how much you love them. Remember that Mary sang a song of revolutionary power and used the darkness of the womb to bear forth the light of the world.

**I leave you with a poem from 1973 by Madeline L’Engle**

**The Risk of Birth, Christmas, 1973**

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn —
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn —
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

