

Natalie W. Bell  
 December 13, 2020  
 Third Sunday Advent

***Joy in a Weary World***  
***Luke 1:46-55***

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

Have you ever heard your mom or another woman in your life tell **a birth story**?  
 Maybe you have a mom who likes to share that with you,  
 Or share it around a family dinner table to embarrass you?

**Women have these stories about their children,**  
 and they often get passed on to future generations,  
 especially when the baby is huge,  
 or born in the car on the way to the hospital!

**Now imagine Mary—and her birth story!**

I wonder if she told it to Jesus over and over again,  
I wonder if he rolled his eyes and said “*Yes, Mama, I remember*”.

***Can you imagine her story?***

Just picture her telling him...

“Well, son, it was not a typical pregnancy,  
You being conceived by the Holy Spirit and all!  
You can’t imagine how scared I was  
when an angel told me everything that would happen.

It caused a lot of ***pain and frustration for your father,***  
and some ***shame*** for both of us,  
considering how this all transpired before the wedding!

But that time was ***also full of so much wonder, and hope.***  
Aunt Elizabeth was pregnant with your cousin John at the time,  
and I went to stay with her.

I was so ***overwhelmed with joy,***  
I literally ***preached,*** almost like a prophet, son!

And when the time came for ***you to be born,***  
Well that’s a whole other story.  
We were traveling to Bethlehem for the census,  
which is no small feat for a pregnant woman.  
And then to add to our stress,  
there was literally ***no room*** for us to stay in any respectable house,  
so....you were born in a ***manger.***  
It was noisy, and smelly, ***and well....BEAUTIFUL.***

*“I know, Mama, I know”.*

***Now listen again, son,***  
***because the story is even bigger, remember?***

It was so beautiful that ***shepherds*** came to see you,  
with tales of hearing your birth announced by angels!  
And they weren’t the only special visitors,

Later **wise men** came from the East,  
bearing gifts like we had never seen before!

***I don't want you to ever forget this story, Jesus.***

Never forget **where** you came from, and **whose** child you are.  
Your life is **so much bigger** than all of us.

Can you picture Mary, **sharing that story again and again** with her son, Jesus?  
I can just imagine it!

Most moms have **a birth story that includes plenty of pain,  
And lots of joy**—especially when they see their precious child.  
Women can endure hours, and hours of pain and labor,  
Unexpected surgeries, dangerous complications,  
And still believe it's all worth it,  
because of the little new life brought into the world.

***Mary's story is a story of pain, but it is also a story of great joy.***

And **finding joy in the middle of pain** seems like a great idea for all of us,  
Especially **this Christmas**,  
In the middle of this pandemic.  
It seems fitting for us to **remember the story** of Jesus' birth,  
And the **way that joy came**—  
How it came---in the middle of chaos.

It was not a Norman Rockwell painting,  
Or a beautiful Christmas card scene.  
It was **real, down to earth, and in many ways very painful**—  
The day Jesus was born they probably felt like it was one of those days when  
**EVERYTHING** that can possibly go wrong, went wrong!

And it was in **THAT environment that JOY itself was born**.  
I love thinking of **Jesus as JOY ITSELF**.

**Today is Joy Sunday**, as we heard at the Advent wreath.

It is known as **Gaudate Sunday**, from the Latin word for Rejoice!  
 Joy Sunday was based on the words of Paul in *Philippians 4:4-5*, which says  
*Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!*

Rolf Jacobson, WorkingPreacher.org, December 6, 2020.

Often churches acknowledge Joy Sunday with **special choirs or pageants**,  
 and today we are highlighting the kids and youth  
 who have prepared a recorded pageant!

***Our scripture today is a joyous one.***

As I told the kids, it's known as the Magnificat or Mary's Song.

But let's be honest—she is **preaching**, isn't she?

This is a definitely a **sermon**.

And **not just any sermon**—

she is preaching about the **Messiah**,

the Savior, the one all God's people have been waiting for all these years.

She is preaching **like prophets and priests** before her, long before her,

and using stories passed down, of God's goodness and salvation.

**Mary knew the stories of women** who had been blessed by God

in supernatural ways—

women like **Sarah** giving birth in her old age,

or **Hannah** who was barren until she prayed for a child before the Lord.

Mary probably knew **Hannah's song** from the scriptures,

a song Hannah sang after the birth of her son, Samuel.

Listen to some of those words from 1 Samuel 2:

*The Lord makes poor and makes rich;*

*he brings low, he also exalts.*

<sup>8</sup>*He raises up the poor from the dust;*

*he lifts the needy from the ash heap,*

*to make them sit with princes*

*and inherit a seat of honor.*<sup>[c]</sup>

*For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,*

*and on them he has set the world.*

**Mary had heard these stories of the ancestors,**  
with **wonder and awe**,  
and now she found herself **wanting to sing** about all of it.

After taking it all in, Gabriel's announcement of Jesus' birth,  
the person he would become,  
she was **overwhelmed with JOY**.  
And so she sang to God,  
She **praised God for all that would arrive** in this child's birth!

And if the words sound **familiar**, that's because they are!  
You may remember **Jesus' first sermon** in Luke 4,  
when he goes to the temple and reads from the scroll of Isaiah, saying:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Kind of makes you **think that Jesus learned a little bit from his mother Mary!**  
I'm sure she shared the story of his miraculous birth.  
But Mary and Joseph also shared **the prophecies** about the Savior  
with Jesus as he was growing up.  
She **knew the stories** of her people, just as she says in her song:

*He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Mary knew the **prophecies about the Messiah**—  
She knew about **God's goodness in a world of pain and suffering**.

So *she preached that goodness*,  
Just as so many people before her had done.

And all of those sermons have *similar themes*:  
Like the blind regaining sight,  
and the poor receiving more,  
the powerful being brought low,  
and the lowly exalted,  
freedom from oppression,  
and a whole new way of life.

And all those sermons can all be summed up in **2 words: GOOD NEWS.**

***Good News.***

And not just any good news—*good news of great joy for all people*—  
just as the angels announced at Jesus' birth.  
Jesus' arrival was the Good News of salvation and new life.

***It was GOOD news in a world full of BAD NEWS.***

There was plenty of bad news back then, too.  
No social media or television,  
But people still suffered, they still experienced pain,  
They were severely oppressed.  
It was a ***broken and weary*** world.

And people needed—***desperately needed***—  
to hear some ***hope, and joy***.  
And ***Jesus—WAS the joy!***

Mary sings about this in her song:  
When she sings of God's ***Mercy—the Greek word Eleos***—  
a word for compassion, kindness, goodwill for those in need.

I think it's so ***easy to think that this Christmas***,  
Will be ***missing true joy***.  
So many of us are separated from loved ones,  
We won't be sharing the usual meals and parties and gatherings.

We aren't in church singing carols each week.  
And then there's the grief and sorrow we've seen all year long.

***So, how are we supposed to experience JOY*** in the middle of this weary world?

I wonder if we find it by paying attention to what God is doing around us.  
And believing that God is at work in our lives.  
What if we hang onto the words of Mary, and all in the Christmas story,  
Believing that the ***good news of great joy*** still comes to us today.  
And sometimes, that joy comes in unexpected times and places.

And I believe it comes ***alongside the pain and suffering*** of this world.  
I believe that joy can come in the middle of grief,  
It can show up right when things seem at their worst.

In our Sunday School study book, *A Weary World* by Kathy Escobar, she says that  
we all need to ***embrace PARADOX***, especially at Christmas.

She means that our ***temptation is to live in a black and white world***,  
instead of acknowledging the gray.  
We believe that things are either ***all good, or all bad***,  
when in reality good and bad occur ***together***.  
We can ***experience both—at the same time***.

***Why is that important?***

It's important because our ***God gives us lives full of paradox***.  
The ***Christmas story***, the Bible, is full of it—pain and wonder, struggle and hope.  
sometimes in just a few verses, like in some of the Psalms!

So, when we realize that ***paradox, or holding two opposites together***,  
Is actually ***a GOOD THING***—THAT brings us hope and life.

We start to realize that when we find ourselves  
***hating*** something, we can also look for the ***love***.  
When we fall into ***despair***, we can look for the ***hope***.

Sure, ***it's easier to live in an all or nothing world***. Good or bad. Up or down.  
 And Christians sure try this all the time,  
 We even throw around guilt when people who are so blessed  
 acknowledge that life is a mess!  
 When we are weary, we all want the ***bad to just be over—to be done with it***.  
 So we can fall into the temptation to ignore it, or gloss over it...

***But the truth is life is BOTH good and bad,***

Beautiful and ugly,  
 Peaceful and chaotic,  
 All rolled into one!

***Light and dark exist side by side....***

and sometimes ***we need the dark*** to bring out the brightest lights,  
 like sparkling stars, in a deep dark night sky!

Mary's baby boy ***brought her Joy*** beyond measure,  
 But she was soon reminded by Anna and Simeon that  
 This child would be opposed,  
 and ***"a sword would pierce her own soul too"*** (Luke 2:35)  
 After all, Jesus was not her own,  
 and he would pay the ultimate price for his mission and ministry.

But that's the secret—***joy comes in the middle of all that--***  
 the good, the bad, the light, the dark....

And it is **GOOD NEWS**—***good news of great joy for ALL people.***  
***Including Us.***

Friends, a Savior has been born for us, and he is Christ our Lord.  
 For this greatest gift, all God's people say, Amen.