**Magnificat Joy**

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Scripture: *Luke 1:39-55, Isa 35:1-10*

Almost two years ago at this time, I was over 8 months pregnant with our daughter, joking with Patrick and worship deacon Brent that I was the Advent worship visual that year! I remember being intensely aware that while we were so excited for our new little baby’s pending arrival, we were also marking a series of “lasts” – our last Christmas as a family of three, my last times of being able to give our eldest my full attention for a while, my last while of getting proper sleep and having some time to myself. Fast forward to now, and I can barely remember what life was like before our youngest came on the scene. She has changed our lives, our whole world – as children tend to do. And I remember about a week after her birth, our eldest said, “Let’s have another baby!” To which I just laughed. It had dawned on him that he got a baby sister out of all this – without knowing the great efforts it had taken on our parts as parents. To him, it was just the joy of having another child in the house, of having gained a sibling; to us, it had taken pain, struggle, and risk to get her there.

In our scripture texts for today, on this Third Sunday of Advent, there is this same tension as we stand with Mary and with the prophet Isaiah on the cusp of new life. On the one hand, both of these passages speak of great joy. On the other, these passages are about very serious and profound changes that are on the horizon. In this season, as we prepare for Christmas, there is a lot of talk about joy, but I want to suggest that these passages speak to us about a very particular kind of joy, one that is deeply rooted in faith in what God is doing in the world. I’m calling it Magnificat Joy, after Mary’s song.

We begin with Isaiah’s glorious passage in chapter 35 about the desert bursting into bloom – a hymn of joy. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,” he declares, “the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.” Here, Isaiah personifies the very landscape, depicting the desert itself as joyful and rejoicing, singing a floral song of praise. It reminded me of that famous Ralph Waldo Emerson quote – “Earth laughs in flowers” – except here it is the lifeless wilderness, the dry desert, that is blooming and lush and flowing with waters and streams, in Isaiah’s beautiful imagery. While the full effect of a blooming desert might be lost on us, perhaps a Saskatchewan parallel might be the frozen lifelessness of prairie winter suddenly bursting into spring bloom. This really is a picture of “springtime joy” just as we descend into the bleakness of winter[[1]](#footnote-1) – which is actually a common Christmas image. This morning, the choir has sung several carols which speak to this theme of new life in the dead of winter – the image of Jesus Christ the apple tree, which is tied to Garden of Eden imagery of the Tree of Life and the evergreen trees we put up and decorate at this time of year. And the carol, “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” picks up on other imagery from Isaiah of Jesus as a shoot growing out of the stump of Jesse, celebrating the new life the Messiah will bring to the lineage of the Israelite King David, calling Jesus “a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter.” There we have the snowy wilderness of winter bursting into fragile bloom, a parallel miracle to Isaiah’s rejoicing desert.

But what is the occasion for this unexpected, flowering joy? As Christians, we are used to reading later history back into Isaiah. We often assume that he is speaking exclusively of Jesus and forget to pay attention to what was going on in Isaiah’s own context. You see, Isaiah was writing during the time of the Babylonian exile, when the people of Israel were trying to make sense of the collapse of their beloved nation, and the destruction of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, also called Zion. Over and over, the biblical prophets wonder where God was in this time of national crisis. Was God absent or angry? What was God doing? As he spells out toward the end of the passage, Isaiah is talking here about the end of the exile: the return of the exiles to Jerusalem and the restoration of Israel. He speaks about a highway through the desert “called the Holy Way” on which the “redeemed” will travel. “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (v. 8a, 9b-10). This occasion of utter joy – joy so contagious that the land itself catches it – is none other than the homecoming of the homesick exiles, finally crossing the desert from Babylon to their beloved city of Zion. And just a few chapters later, Isaiah will repeat this imagery of the desert highway in chapter 40, which begins with the famous words, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

But as Regina Shands Stoltzfus reminds us, “The wilderness, in and of itself, does not point to a viable future.”[[2]](#footnote-2) For the Israelites, the wilderness was an ambiguous place, as it is for us. For them, it was the place of wandering for 40 years before entering Canaan, as well as the path to Babylonian exile. Today, we speak of “wilderness experiences” as those difficult moments in our lives when we feel somewhat lost; and we have very mixed feelings about these times. Shands Stoltzfus reflects, “For so many people, this is a wilderness time. People who have been through them know that wilderness experiences are not simply about vast, sprawling spaces. They are places, seasons of desolation and barrenness, places where there is no sustenance, places that are harsh on one’s body and spirit.”[[3]](#footnote-3) For many, Advent and Christmas are this kind of wilderness time, which we’ve been exploring in our Adult Ed. series on “Blue Christmas.” And yet, Shands Stoltzfus continues, both the Old and New Testaments “remind us that the wilderness is the very place we can and do meet God. The prophet Isaiah, speaking to people returning from exile, says the wilderness shall be glad, the desert will bloom, and healing will come. In the Gospel[s],” Jesus and John the Baptist go to the wilderness to pray and to meet God. She concludes, “In the season of Advent expectation, we are invited to receive God as we are. It is easy to let the commercial trappings and cultural expectations of the season convince us to put on a happy face, even if on the inside we are grieving, or scared, or angry. God promises to meet us, even in the wilderness.”[[4]](#footnote-4) And God, the creator of heaven and earth, promises to make joy bloom even in the desolation of the wilderness, even in the dead of winter. This is what we wait for, what we expect is on its way, during Advent.

This brings us to our other song of joy for today: Mary’s song, also known as the Magnificat, from the Latin of the first line: My soul magnifies the Lord.” As in Isaiah, we have here a story of travel and the fulfillment of prophecy; there is joy here, but also risk. In an Advent blog post, Nancy Rockwell points out an aspect of Mary’s story that we don’t always think about; something hiding in plain sight: namely, that Mary was a traveler, even a daring adventurer. “What we find her doing, over and over, is traveling, in journeys that involve risks and an element of danger.”[[5]](#footnote-5) And this really is central to most of the biblical stories about Mary: after she has accepted the angel Gabriel’s commission, she travels to meet her cousin Elizabeth, which is where she sings her Magnificat. But afterward, she also must travel to Bethlehem, then to Egypt, then back to Nazareth, then on pilgrimages to the Temple when Jesus is 12, and so on. Mary is an experienced traveler – though it’s important for us to remember that not all of these were chosen journeys. I’ve also heard Mary called a displaced person and a refugee, as suggested in the children’s story this morning.

So let’s get back to that first trip, to see her cousin Elizabeth. This is Mary’s first reaction to this bewildering message from the angel; she goes “with haste” to see her dear relative. Remember, she is pregnant with a child which is not her fiancé’s – a serious, potentially lethal situation in that context, punishable by breaking the engagement at best and stoning at worst. At this point, she is in desperate need of some wise advice! When Mary arrives at her cousin’s home, she is warmly greeted and welcomed. As soon as Elizabeth hears Mary’s voice, she blesses Mary and blesses her pregnancy, as she is led to do by the Holy Spirit and by the joy of the child (baby John the Baptist) in her womb. This joyful blessing confirms for Mary that all of this really is happening, and that it really is good – albeit complicated – news! So her response to this confirmation and blessing from Elizabeth is her famous song of praise, in which she sings her gratitude to God for all that God has done for her, for her people, and for those suffering from hunger and poverty and despair.

As you may know, this song has not always been emphasized in the Christian tradition. In fact, it has been seen as downright controversial! Kathleen Norris writes that in the 1980s, the Guatemalan government banned the use of Mary’s song in worship, fearing it smacked too much of political revolution, of overturning the status quo. And to us, this song is still startling, because it turns our expectations on their heads. In Norris’ words, “The Magnificat reminds us that what we most value, all that gives us status – power, pride, strength, and wealth – can be a barrier to receiving what God has in store for us.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Mary had none of these things, except strength – and yet she is the one upon God “has looked with favour,” whom God has chosen for this crucial task. Alice Connor talks about it this way: “…while visiting her cousin Elizabeth, [Mary] sang loud and long about gratitude and her own unworthiness to be a mother and how overwhelmingly giddy it made her. She sang about God’s attentiveness to the people with no power and about God’s power to remake the world. She sang about justice and regime change and transformation. ‘This child will change everything,’ she sang. ‘This child has already changed everything.’ In the end, a breathless silence, and then cousin Elizabeth applauded and called her ‘Prophetess,’ and they laughed.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

We still find this song startling, I think, precisely because it mixes two realms that we normally don’t associate. We wonder, what do prophetic words about political renewal have to do with mothering? Why does Mary’s joy at receiving confirmation of her pregnancy take the form of this prophetic song of deliverance from the status quo? But Mary herself doesn’t seem to find this contradictory at all. She is a “pregnant prophet”[[8]](#footnote-8) singing with joy about the changes God has brought about through her pregnancy and her child. And notice the verb tenses here (maybe you already have, if you’re a language nerd like me!). Mary’s song speaks about these changes in the past tense, as if they have already happened. God “has done great things” for her, God “has scattered the proud” and “lifted up the lowly,” God “has filled the hungry with good things” and fulfilled the promise to Abraham’s children. She sings with joy as if salvation has already come, with a certainty that even Isaiah doesn’t have about the highway through the blooming desert. With the confirmation of her pregnancy from Elizabeth, Mary has complete faith that God’s redemption is now underway – it’s like it has already come to pass. And she sings a song of gratitude at what God will now do through her and her child. As Connor wrote, ‘This child will change everything…This child has already changed everything.’”[[9]](#footnote-9) What a statement of faith and hope! And what a statement of joy at what God is doing in the world. This is Magnificat joy.

One thing that has brought me joy this Advent – and others have mentioned this to me as well – has been the children’s participation in our special offering for EGADZ. I can think of nothing more fitting for Advent than to extend generosity in this simple yet tangible way to young people in our city – including the baby bags for teen parents not so different from Mary. We worship a God who was born in a stable to displaced peasant parents, who later became refugees to Egypt. This is where we find the face of Christ today – in those struggling to find joy, in those born into difficult circumstances, in those experiencing exile and longing for a home. This congregation has a long history of reaching out in this and other ways – not least through our decades of sponsoring refugee families. And we take joy in this, considering it a privilege to help where we can, to make things a little more just in this world of injustice and brokenness. We know it comes with great challenges, and yet we take joy in this task. And the children, running up and down the aisles with overflowing baskets, have caught onto this joy, too. It’s a contagious joy, joy at what can be if God’s will is done on earth, as it sometimes is.

I want to close with an image from present-day Bethlehem, where there is a massive concrete separation wall, separating the Palestinian West Bank from Israel. We know that things are not much different in the Holy Land from the time Jesus was born: there is still violence and occupation, and peace still seems far off. But on this very wall, someone has painted an icon of Mary. They are calling it “Our Lady Who Breaks Down Walls,” and are inviting people of faith to gather there and pray for peace.[[10]](#footnote-10) To me, this is a powerful example of how Mary and her Magnificat Joy continue to inspire us to see beyond the harshness of our circumstances to what could be. As we remember her and her son, we continue to find strength to live as if peace were already a reality, as if the literal and figurative walls had already come down, as if the lifeless desert had already begun to bloom. And with God’s help, these changes will come. They have already begun. AMEN

Holy One,  
Give us the courage to welcome Christ into every part of our lives,

so that, like Mary, we will hope for a better world,  
like Elizabeth, the Shepherds, and the Holy Family,  
we will be brave and bold in our living,  
like the Innkeeper and animals, we will be welcoming of others. …

May we always be ready to welcome, Emmanuel, Christ with us. Amen.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. See <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2019/12/12/wild-lectionary-the-desert-shall-rejoice-and-blossom/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Regina Shands Stoltzfus, “Advent: Healing Has Come, God is Here,” <https://themennonite.org/advent-healing-come-god/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Nancy Rockwell, “No More Lying about Mary,” <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/no-more-lying-about-mary/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kathleen Norris, “Fourth Friday of Advent,” in *God with Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas*, ed. Greg Pennoyer and Gregory Wolfe(Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007), 115-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Alice Connor, *Fierce: Women of the Bible and Their Stories of Violence, Mercy, Bravery, Wisdom, Sex, and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Connor, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See <https://www.rpbooks.co.uk/our-lady-who-breaks-down-walls> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://www.united-church.ca/prayers/give-us-courage-welcome-christ> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)